THE PIPER'S PRICE

HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

THE PIPER'S PRICE

BOOKS BY

HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

A LITTLE DUSKY HERO
A SON OF THE HILLS
AT THE CROSSROADS
CAMP BRAVE PINE
JANET OF THE DUNES
JOLINE
JOYCE OF THE NORTH WOODS
MAM'SELLE JO
OUT OF THE CLAY
PENELOPE'S WEB
PRINCESS RAGS AND TATTERS
SMOTHERED FIRES
THE MAN THOU GAVEST
THE PIPER'S PRICE
THE PLACE BEYOND THE WINDS
THE SHIELD OF SILENCE
THE TENTH WOMAN
THE VINDICATION
UNBROKEN LINES

THE PIPER'S PRICE

BY HARRIET T. COMSTOCK

DOUBLEDAY, DORAN
AND COMPANY, INC.
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.
MCMXXIX

COPYRIGHT, 1929
BY HARRIET T. COMSTOCK
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

FIRST EDITION

With sincere affection I dedicate this book to Barbara Wilson Comstock. Her sympathy and interest have been lights upon my way into the world of youth.

THE PIPER'S PRICE

The Piper raised his Pipe and waited.
Joan Radcliffe chose her tune.
The dance is on!

CHAPTER I

THEY were having breakfast together, Patricia Henley and her granddaughter, Joan Radcliffe, and to something Mrs. Henley said Joan replied:

"The difference between girls of your time, Grandy, and mine is simply this: we are willing to pay the Piper and you were not. I hate to say it, darling, but you sneaked like little ladies, while we stalk unafraid."

Patricia gave her little laugh, followed by the suggestion of a sigh that always made Joan's eyes flicker, and she retorted: "My dear girl, there's one thing that all youth has in common. It never knows what the Piper's price is until the bill is presented, and then it finds that it has not enough with which to pay."

At this Joan dropped her eyes.

It was amusing, the resemblance between Patricia Henley and Joan. They were more like mother and daughter than grandmother and granddaughter. Some daring friends had gone as far as to say that they looked like older and younger sister, but Patricia always resented that.

All that Patricia was, Joan promised, in good time, to become. Both were tall and slim, and Joan's gold and rose were, in the older woman, ivory and soft silver. Patricia made no futile attempts to preserve her youth-

ful appearance, but she lived wisely and well; kept her interest in life up-to-date and above all things prized the friendship and confidence of Joan.

"There should be a link, not a barrier, between youth and age," she often said, and added, "I am trying to prove that this is so."

Joan was a seeker and a tester of life. Gayly she reached forth with one eager hand and, quite unconsciously, to be sure, clung with the other to all that meant safety and deep-rooted convictions. Patricia and Joan might differ as to essentials, the color and shade of morals and customs, but their standards, once realized, were alike—adamant.

The love and confidence that existed between them rested, both know, upon a sense of freedom. If ever Patricia, heedlessly, invaded the privacy of Joan's soul, the girl's quick withdrawing warned her of danger. And so Patricia had learned to protect the outpost under delicate disguises that Joan never suspected.

They glanced warily at each other now. Then Joan spoke again.

"After all, Grandy, he who is willing to pay the Piper has a right to choose the tune, hasn't he?"

Mrs. Henley was still retreating before what might prove an issue, so with a little shrug of her shoulders she replied:

"Oh, I suppose so, but to change the subject, I did miss you, Joan, at Atlantic City. It is only pleasant there when one has company. It is no place for introspection."

"If you could only have postponed your trip one week, Grandy."

"At my age, when your joints begin to creak you do not postpone trips."

"At your age, Grandy! Why, darling, you are ageless." And Joan wafted a kiss.

"Perhaps so, my dear, but at least I am conscious, now and then, of joints, and the air of the Jersey coast is good for them; there must be something about the Gulf Stream that does it—queer about that all-pervading Gulf Stream." Then: "And your week, Joan, was it a success? Excuse me—a howling success?"

"It was just that, Grandy. Howling! Like all Nancy's parties, this was a sudden inspiration and it—soared from start—almost to the finish." Mrs. Henley noted the pause while Joan hurried on:

"You see, dear, had I gone with you five people would have been disappointed."

"Instead of one old lady," Patricia broke in with her cheerful smile.

"Now, Grandy, you are certainly making yourself disagreeable." Patricia again heeded the signal.

"Forgive me, Joan, perhaps the Gulf Stream hasn't done all for me that I hoped."

It was that party of Nancy Holt's that was troubling Patricia. It had troubled her since first Joan had mentioned it. She wanted, now, to know the details, but details were exactly what Joan always protected with that young independence of hers. She would deal out driblets, but Patricia, hungering, fearing too, longed for complete confidence. So she took another furtive step.

"Who were at the Holt lodge besides you and Nancy?" she asked.

"Oh, a specially picked crowd! Even to-day one has

to choose carefully when one takes to the deep woods." Joan hesitated, then went on, having hastily decided upon the driblet method, "But even with all Nan's care and foresight, she fell down. Corlyss Trent was there and Bob Martin; Ted Roland, of course—he's always where Nan is, then there was Norman Grey. The party began radiantly. The Adirondack camp hadn't been opened—the main house, I mean—since Nan's grandfather died. Of course there is a caretaker there all the time. He lives in a cabin near by. We went up in two cars—such fun! We drove all night. While we were up there we dressed in knickers and high boots. Lived the rough and simple. For three days it was sublime. Golden days. Grandy, were you ever part of the autumn coloring, not a mere onlooker?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You've missed a thrill. 'Deep Woods'—isn't that a wonderful name for a lodge?—is hid among the trees like the palace of the Sleeping Beauty." Joan was sparring, but Patricia had infinite patience. "Nights around blazing log fires; we told yarns and sang, we only went to bed when complete exhaustion overcame us."

Mrs. Henley refilled her coffee cup and looked over Joan's head into distance, across the Hudson River, to the hills beyond.

"Nancy says the place is haunted. You know how whimsical Nan can be. This party was a ghost-laying one."

"The irreverent limb!" Patricia smiled a rather forced smile and lured Joan on. "I hope she did not evolve new ghosts. I can imagine your thrills. But who went along——" Mrs. Henley caught herself in time.

Almost she used the archaic word "chaperon." Instead she asked, "Who went along to do the chores?"

Joan withdrew—she also was on guard. "I told you, Grandy, there is a caretaker up there and he has a wife; at least he produced a woman when we wanted one." A pause while Joan sifted her morsels. "There are the cunningest little studios scattered around the main building—Nan's parents were artistic, you know, and catered to that kind. Nan explained that her mother, when her guests had the urge, banished them to studios until they worked off their inspirations."

Patricia was growing restive. It was hard for her pride to submit to this young and confident hand upon the rein.

Another pause. Oh, those pauses!

"It was Corlyss who ran amuck." Joan flung this out defiantly.

Patricia sipped her coffee and continued to gaze above Joan's head; but now she could not see the hills beyond the river. They were lost in mist—a mist that gathered in Patricia's eyes as she thought of Joan rushing into danger while she was incapable of even warning her.She knew how hopeless it was to point out pitfalls to them who believed only in wings.

Then, so suddenly that it brought Patricia to a startled standstill, Joan said, leaning forward over arms folded on the table, "Grandy, I'm going to tell you something."

And now it was Mrs. Henley who could afford to spar while she caught her breath and rallied her dignity. "You better have some hot coffee, my dear, and let me ring for some fresh toast."

"Thanks, no. I'm fed up. You see, Grandy, it's about Corlyss Trent and Bob Martin."

This relieved the tension somewhat.

"Corlyss is such an awful fool, Grandy. Everything was simply perfect until she bolted, and then it was as if she had thrown a bomb into a—into a Sunday-school picnic. We never could get the scattered bits into decent shape afterward."

Patricia laughed—rather unsteadily. "One would hardly credit Corlyss with such power," she said.

"Oh, any fool can throw a bomb, Grandy. Corlyss misunderstood things; she has a dirty little mind. She got frightened. Nan's talk about ghosts upset her and she drank a bit too much, the little idiot. She and Bob ran away and got married."

"Married?" Patricia, in spite of herself, looked shocked. "Why, young Martin hasn't a cent. What in the world will her people say?"

"That's just it. We're waiting to hear and I wanted to let you in on it, Grandy."

"Thank you, my dear. But this is most—well, unfortunate, to say the least."

"I should say so! Nan was furious. She said that Corlyss gave the adventure a black eye and raised lurid suspicions. Naturally, this is what her idiocy has done and we're all waiting to dodge the débris when the bomb is through bursting. Nan kept asking Corlyss over and over why on earth she had done it, for everyone knows how the Trents feel."

"And what explanation did Corlyss make?" Patricia asked.

"None. She and Bob packed up and left at once."

"And after she left what happened, Joan? Such a thing is apt to—to have an unsettling effect upon them who remain."

"I should say so, Grandy! We all felt as Adam must have felt when Eve nibbled the apple, rather curious and—scared."

This, strange to say, had a comforting effect upon Patricia. Anything that could frighten Nancy Holt and Joan was to be respected.

"I'm afraid you are a bit upset, Joan," she said. "You better let me ring for more toast and coffee."

"No, thanks, but who wouldn't be upset, Grandy? After Corlyss went we all felt as if we were going about with too few clothes on—sort of naked, you know. We agreed not to talk about it, but that made it worse. We all seemed then to be dodging something we'd never suspected being there."

Mrs. Henley got up and walked about the room. She did not like the idea of Joan dodging, but Joan kept on dealing out her driblets.

"Really, it was the men who dodged. Men are the real conservatives."

Patricia wanted to laugh at the foolish cant, but somehow her lips refused to smile.

"Ted actually asked Nan to marry him. She told him that under the circumstances she considered his proposal an insult. She managed to humiliate Ted in the end."

"Naturally. And Norman Grey?" Patricia set a picture straight on the wall. "Norman, so far, seems to have been cast for a minor rôle. Did he come on the

stage at all or was he"—Patricia tried to be facetious —"a voice from the distance?"

Joan paused a moment before answering; she had to pick her way now. "Oh! Norman was quite untouched by it all," she said presently. "It takes a good deal to sidetrack Norman."

"Well, apparently this was something of a jog, Joan. One would hardly think Norman had such well-balanced nerves."

"Don't be snippy, Grandy." This was a definite signal.

"Is this all?" Patricia asked. Then: "I have a busy day before me, dear. How about this evening? Could you meet me, say at the Plaza, at seven? We might have dinner and go to a play."

"I'd adore that, Grandy." Joan looked up and smiled. Her troubles, now that Patricia shared them in diluted form, seemed to fade away. After all, perhaps too much had been made of an unpleasant occurrence. Corlyss had made things seem wrong; it was what one thought himself that mattered. But this flimsy philosophy, somehow, didn't hold, once the door closed upon Patricia Henley.

Left to herself, Joan rang the bell for the maid and aimlessly sauntered from the room. She must plan her day. Usually the time was all too short for what must be done, but it was the choosing of duties and pleasures that confused her now. She really did not want to do anything.

Joan's room was at the back of the house on the second floor, its windows overlooked carefully designed gardens gay with autumn flowers—a beauty spot in a

crowded city. The windows were raised; a maid had set the room in order, so Joan pushed a wicker couch close to the windows and lay down.

"I'll take a little nap—I'm tired." This was surrender indeed, but to relax, close one's eyes, according to formula, was one thing, to sleep, another. Shutting out the dear, familiar room but made it possible for other scenes to drift in. At first Joan did not repulse them; her keen senses quickened, her imagination carried her back to deep woods ablaze with scarlet and gold; a smell of wood fires, moonlight on black frost. Black? Why, it was white as silver. And the stillness! It was a thing apart, that stillness. Into it crept soft and ghostly sounds—the stirring of wings, the scurrying of little timid feet. They were like spiritual things against the wonderful stillness.

Music, too, a violin and voices singing—Nan's and Ted Roland's. How beautifully they sang together. It had been divine until Corlyss stripped something like a bandage from their eyes, breaking the spell and making them see!

Joan got up and stretched her arms. Sleep was out of the question, so she walked across the room and stood in front of a long mirror. She looked keenly at her young, beautiful body. It seemed strange to her; she was curious about it. This body of hers, with all its quick, keen senses, had betrayed her. It had made demands, it had escaped the *real,* the familiar part of her, and had gone far, so far that Joan, now, felt like questioning it, felt like trying to understand it, but it eluded her. There must be something in common between her real self and that vagabond self. There must be some

excuse, some explanation that would justify, unite them again. The straight, slim body wore familiar garments; the eyes, the mouth, were her own. Joan looked at her pretty hands, her slim, neatly shod feet; she strove in some way to connect them with that detached self that apparently had no need of them; that errant part of her was a winged thing—already it was again soaring away, leaving the real, the solid, the thinking Joan intact and confused.

Was it possible, Joan reflected, staring at herself in the mirror, that the senses could so trick one? Was it possible that they could betray all the best that one believed in and then desert one? It seemed as if this were so.

It is always a baffling moment when, for the first time, individuality and personality come violently into contact. Joan was undergoing the experience now.

She regarded more closely her reflection in the mirror. Her reflection! That was it. There was a great, impassable distance between the reflection, the thing she was not, and the real self. "And I'm twenty-three, too," she faltered as if that might throw light on the situation. But it did not.

What does twenty-three signify when it has been shielded and protected; and, at the same time, permitted to look on at a distance; to hear, without intelligence, the thing called Life?

Joan had learned words and phrases, had used them as a clever child does and often with startling appropriateness, but she had never understood. And taking advantage of that, something had escaped and gone on its own adventuring. Of course, no one in all her world

would ever understand, could be expected to understand. Neither Nancy nor Patricia Henley, least of all Patricia Henley. Corlyss Trent might understand. That was the shocking thing about it. Corlyss *would* understand, and at that moment a sort of loathing for Corlyss made Joan feel ill.

She turned from the mirror and again stretched herself on the couch. But Corlyss refused to be dismissed. Joan, relieved of the sight of her own reflection, was confronted by others as little understood as her own. Corlyss, Nancy, and she had grown up together, talked the same language, and believed themselves wise and dependable. And yet here was Corlyss's real self revealed. Corlyss's individuality and personality were in perfect accord; her senses never outran whatever stood for reason in the agile brain. In a way, Joan had always sensed this about Corlyss, just as she had sensed Nancy Holt's superficial daring, which was sharply checked at a critical moment.

It was growing clearer. Joan began to see the difference between reality and reflections, and the knowledge blinded her. Here she was left to deal with what, in a sense, she had had nothing to do with. That was the appalling thing about it. If she had understood and chosen her course she would have been willing to bear any, all consequences. She was no coward. But she, her real self, had been betrayed and now was confronted with the responsibility of solution. It wasn't fair, but there was no alternative.

And at that moment Joan accepted the challenge. She struggled no longer. As decisions must be made she would make them—without compromise. She would

not be cowed by whatever there was in her that could not be depended upon. She would neither ask nor expect understanding or assistance, only so might she hope to *be herself*. Perhaps she had inherited this—Joan groped backward in the hope of laying hold of something that might legitimately be right for her to grip—from her father.

Patricia rarely spoke of Joan's father, but Joan had always known that he had broken her mother's life and hurt Patricia. Patricia had seen to that! "Well, he shall not break my life," vowed Joan. At that moment she felt strong and fearless. After all, her philosophy *could* be depended upon; she had done some thinking. Paying the Piper and all the rest—it meant more than words. Joan even mustered a smile, her best and bravest one.

But what was she to do with the long day until she met Patricia? Nancy was probably still at the lodge. Grey, Roland, and Joan had left her there two days ago.

"I want to be alone," Nancy had said. "I know I'm brutal, hounding you all out like this, but I want to clean the place up and myself, too. So please do not argue—just go."

And so they had obeyed. It had been rather a trying ride back. Hardly a word had been spoken that was not absolutely necessary. Grey had driven the car. Roland, gloomy and silent, shared the back seat with Joan, the luggage heaped about them. Joan had bidden the two good-bye at her door and had heard from neither of them since. No, Nancy was out of the question.

Just then the telephone buzzed and, grateful for any interruption, Joan took up the receiver. It was Patricia.

"Have you had luncheon yet?" she asked.

"Luncheon?" Joan glanced at her wrist watch—it was nearly one! That's what happened to time when one went around in circles. "I'm—just going down now, Grandy."

"I though perhaps you'd like to join me earlier." There was hope in Patricia's tone, casual as the words were.

But Joan, with nothing to do, shrank from meeting Patricia just then. "I think it better be seven, dear," she said, "there's still a—lot to do."

"Very well—eat a good lunch, Joan. You looked tired when I left."

Patricia's ever-watchful care often irritated Joan, even though it was so gracefully veiled that she could not openly resent it, but now it brought the tears to her eyes and she turned away. At least she must make a pretense of carrying on normally. With this in mind Joan started downstairs. A maid met her on the first landing.

"I was just coming to call you to lunch, Miss Joan, but Mr. Grey is in the library——"

"Mr. Grey?" For a moment Joan started back, then rallied her forces. "Thanks," she said quietly. "I will not want any lunch. I may go out with Mr. Grey."

Joan walked on, struggling to control her excitement. She must remember her resolution. She had hoped that Grey would give her more time—and yet she was rather glad he had not.

Norman Grey was standing by the window, his back to the door. His hat and light overcoat lay upon a chair. He had not heard Joan and she had a moment

in which to regard his broad back. His shoulders looked as if they were stiffened to a hard task. Joan's sensitive nerves were keen to impression, and this thought brought color again to her face while her own shoulders grew rigid.

"Norman!" The young man turned and faced her.

"Joan!" He crossed the room with quick strides. His face was almost stern in its new lines of determination. Joan felt a wild inclination to laugh.

"Let us sit down," she said, escaping the outstretched hands. It was most alarming: Grey seemed suddenly a stranger to her, a stranger.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS going to be most embarrassing to discuss things with a stranger. Joan glanced timidly up into Grey's young face as he sat beside her. If only he would look as he had looked those nights as they sat by the fire in one of the little studios in the woods! It would have been easy enough then to discuss things, but this man beside her now——

"Joan, I had to come."

"Of course." Joan was irritated by her sense of awkwardness; where were her code, her honesty? It was her plain duty to meet Grey halfway, and here she was thrusting him into the position of an intruder.

"I say, Joan, don't make it harder than it has to be," Grey was pleading. His boyish eyes were suddenly the eyes of a man; they made Joan flinch.

"I—I do not mean to make anything hard, Norman. Why should I?" This was a weak subterfuge and it drove Joan into an unconsidered position.

"Just why *have* you come, Norman?" As soon as the words were spoken Joan felt their insincerity—the possible inference Grey might draw from them. But Grey surprised her. He did not withdraw; neither did he touch her. He said simply:

"I—I had to come, Joan. I am going away—at once. I may never return, certainly not for years, anyway. Will you come with me?"

"Come with you?" Joan leaned back against the pil-

lows and repeated inanely: "Come with you?" And then as if changing a word might clear the matter, "Go with you?" she said.

Grey's face flushed. He resented Joan's attitude and apparent detachment. What did she mean by it?

"You make a fellow feel like a fish in a glass bowl," he burst out. "I wish you'd stop staring at me as if you had never seen me."

This was more like the Grey with whom Joan was familiar. The words and tone revived her.

"You surprised me," she managed to say, "about going away, you know. I hadn't the least idea——"

"Joan, I'm obliged to go away. I have no choice. I'm going to South America, going into one of my father's offices down there. See?" Joan did not "see," and was thankful for the momentary blankness.

"I might as well have it over!" Grey's face grew tense. "I got in a snarl at the bank. It would have been all right. I had never messed things before—it was the races—but there was an investigation. Father's given me this chance and I've learned my lesson, God knows! You can do anything with me, Joan. Together, off there, we'll show what we can do——" Grey's eyes were dim.

Joan leaned her elbow on her knees, rested her chin in her hands, and continued to stare at Grey. She simply could not comprehend what he had said.

Grey moved restlessly. He knew he had put his case badly, knew he could never express the best that was in him because he always damaged himself—but his eyes were pleading desperately.

At last Joan asked: "Did you know this when you came to the lodge?"

What it was he knew wasn't quite clear, but something had to be said. "Yes. Of course I knew it!" Grey answered.

"Really! You knew that you had to be sent away and yet you came there—and——"

"See here, Joan. Haven't you ever heard of a condemned man having his fling? With years of exile staring me in the face. Well, I had my last fling, and you——"

"Stop!" Joan's eyes blazed. She was laying emphasis now upon the thing that in her code counted most—dishonesty, taking advantage. Was it possible that Grey thought that in this way he could force her?

"How dared you!" she whispered. "I wish you'd go now, Norman. Go, before I say something bitter. Something that we'd both be sorry for. Go!"

"Joan, you've got to hear me out." Grey looked determined. But after all, there must not be a scene. "You may need me," he said desperately. "Something might happen to you, and Joan, I love you! You may not believe me now, but let me prove it. Come with me, Joan."

Like one walking in her sleep, Joan got up and crossed the room and closed the door. The mere act seemed to safeguard Grey and herself from intrusion. She would have locked the door had she dared. Then she came back, drew a chair close, and sat down, facing Grey.

"I—I see what you mean," she began, hardly above a whisper, "but I thought we made that perfectly clear, those nights up in the woods. I—I tried to make you understand. We both agreed."

"Don't, Joan, don't. Can't you believe me? I love you!"

To this Joan gave no heed. She went on breathlessly: "You'd better go before I say things we may both regret."

"I'm not going," Grey muttered, and settled back.

"Very well, then, listen. No matter what has happened, Norman, *no matter what,* I wouldn't marry you, go away with you—nothing could drive me to that. Do you think you have any hold upon me? Do you think I would join my life to a man's who could, knowing his dishonor, act as you did up there in the woods? You think, perhaps, that you leave me no choice. If you do you have misunderstood me horribly. Nothing is changed, as far as I am concerned. I never loved you, I shall never understand how I could be as mad as I was, but that is over, and now, now that I see just what you are—— Norman, again I ask you to go."

Grey's eyes blazed under her scorn. "You're dead wrong," he flung out. "Those nights and days were to me what they were to you—wonderful. I knew perhaps better than you did how natural and elemental it all was. I—I gloried in it, and in you; it was then that I knew how I loved you. The Lord knows I never wanted a hold on you then, or now, but a fellow can't leave a woman in the lurch. Joan, try to understand, even if you don't love me." Grey was blundering, floundering. Joan neither then, or ever after, fully comprehended. She was too angry and resentful, too utterly shocked at Grey's attitude even to want to see his point of view.

"I mean," she struggled on, "I mean that I could never trust you again. I'm not thinking of us, of any-

thing we did, but of your trouble here—your business trouble. That made so little impression upon you that after you knew your father was going to buy your safety you could come up to the woods and act as if nothing had happened!"

"Good Lord!" groaned Grey, then completed his own ruin by blurting out: "It's going to be all right, Joan. I've learned my lesson, my father understands."

"And you think you can offer me protection? You? Oh! how little you know me."

Grey shrank from Joan's scorn. Her glance was like something tangible. It pressed into his very soul.

Joan spoke on: "Norman, you must hear the rest of what I have to say. I am quite calm now. I'm trying not to blame you for what you cannot help. You are yourself! I blame myself for not realizing always what I realize now. It has all come suddenly to me. I see what you mean clearer about wanting to—to protect me. I will always remember it. You think I may have a child, don't you? Is that what you really mean?"

Norman dropped his white face in his hands. "Yes," he whispered.

"I see. Well, then, let me make this very clear: even if that were so I would fly from you. It would be the only decent thing I could do. Must I say anything more?" Joan had not spared herself. Her humiliation was complete. She was spent by the effort she had made.

"Yes, you've made me understand." Grey looked up. "I see your point. But there's still one thing you've got to keep in mind for all your high ideals"—a suggestion of a sneer crept in, but the misery in Grey's eyes defeated it—"I'm at the other end of the cable line, Joan.

No matter what you think of me I'm there! Just remember that."

Grey got up and took his coat and hat. He moved toward the door; he believed Joan would relent, would speak his name. "Good-bye," he said as he reached the door and waited.

"Good-bye, Norman. Good-bye." Then, as if the words were wrung from her, "I hope—only good for you, really!"

There was nothing more. "Good-bye," he muttered, and went out.

It had all happened in a half hour! A timid little clock, tuned to the mood of a library, made known the fact. Joan listened and counted the strokes, while all the time her eyes were fixed upon a little statuette that Patricia had recently bought. The "New Eve" it was called; it was an exquisite thing, perfect in form, but with vacant, unawakened face.

Joan felt like one coming from under the effect of ether. She heard the clock and realized the time; she saw the statuette and vaguely caught its meaning. Gropingly she went from the room and upstairs. She dressed and started out, thinking now that she would go and see if Nancy were in. Perhaps if she talked to Nancy . . . but instead she walked across to the park and roamed for hours in the loneliest parts she could find.

It was just as well that Joan did not go to Nancy Holt's, for if she had she would have encountered another complication, another result of that Adirondack week.

Corylss Trent was with Nancy. Since returning, alone, from the mountains, Nancy had telephoned to no one, had basked in the quiet seclusion of her own rooms on the second floor of the old house overlooking Gramercy Park. She had worn nothing but a fluffy, feather-edged negligee; had had her meals sent up, and was beginning to feel comparatively comfortable, when to Nancy's utter dismay a maid had appeared and, at her heels, Corlyss Trent!

Corlyss, seeing Nancy's windows open, had dashed up the steps and rung the bell, then, afraid that she might be rebuffed by Nancy, had rushed up the stairs after the maid.

Nancy, lying on her couch, drew her loose gown about her, sat up, and pushed her bare feet into the slippers near by. "Well," she said, regarding Corlyss's dainty attire, her pretty, vapid face and perfect ease, "you apparently did not mean to run any chance of being refused. Come in"—for Corlyss was standing in the doorway.

Instinctively Nancy looked around the room to see if there were anything likely to be knocked over, for Corlyss was one of the small, active creatures who are curiously awkward. "Take that chair, Corlyss, and do sit still, once you take it."

Corlyss's laugh was suggestive of a giggle. She slipped out of her pretty tan coat, tossed her small tan hat across the room, where it knocked over a bottle on the dresser, and sat down. "Oh, damn!" muttered Nancy, and darted across the room to repair the damage.

"Sorry," Corlyss cried. "Anything precious?"

"Nothing but my best perfume," replied Nancy, sopping it up.

"I'll remember at Christmas," Corlyss comforted. She was twirling, now, a slight, diamond-encrusted platinum circle on her finger. She was fair and pretty. As she looked at twenty-two so she would probably look at fifty, only fatter and more colorless.

"Well," reeking of the perfume, Nancy came back to the couch, "I see you are alive, so I gather that your family haven't smashed the life out of you. I wish they had."

Corlyss's face assumed a comically grave expression; she struggled to appear dignified. She had come to force Nancy's hand and she felt in a position to do so. She wasn't going to be sidetracked by any blunt brutality. She did not intend that Nancy should drop her, make it possible for people to talk. She meant to be very generous to Nancy and put the whole late adventure on a respectable and sound basis. Such an adjustment should mean as much to Nancy as to her, and she would try, patiently, to make Nancy realize this.

"Why should my family crush me?" she asked sweetly, and turned her chidish, innocent blue eyes on Nancy.

"I said smash, not crush," Nancy corrected. "They would have been justified. Fancy! After what they supposed was a pleasant week at my place in the mountains, they had to face you bringing in Bob Martin as loot."

"You have a beastly temper, Nan." Even Corlyss's armor had its thin spots. "And please remember that Bob is my husband."

At this Nancy laughed and ran her fingers through her short curly hair until it stood in revolt about her quivering dark little face.

"You look like a Fiji Islander—a savage one," Corlyss remarked.

"I feel like one," Nancy retorted, "and, by the way, Corlyss, now that we are raking up the past, how did it happen that your people let you come to the lodge, knowing that Bob was invited? I've had that on my mind all along. Joan told me, after I had invited you both, that your father had all but put Bob out of the house the week before my party."

"They—they didn't know. I knew they would make a fuss. I thought you were fine to ask him. I didn't want to make trouble for anyone, so I simply did not mention Bob."

"Nice child." Nancy looked positively interested and then she went on: "I suppose you didn't want to make trouble for anyone when you married Bob, either."

At this Corlyss drew herself up. "I have some sense of morality, Nan."

"So I see. Rather a hybrid kind, but at least, *some*. Just *why* did you marry Bob, Corlyss?" Nancy's interest increased. "Just exactly why? We might as well get an all-around view."

"Well—you see—— Darn it all, Nan, that place, the way we carried on and all the rest—it seemed the only decent thing to do under the circumstances. My people think so, too, now that I have explained. You'll thank me some day."

Nancy's eyes grew grave. "If you had loved Bob, Corlyss, if you had stood up for him against your people

I'd have some respect for you, but does it ever occur to you that you lured Bob into marriage—got him cornered, made it impossible for him to escape and in so doing forced your family's hand?"

"You're insulting, Nan!" Corlyss flamed. "You are cold and—and unusual. So there! Not having a particle of sex appeal, not being a—a—man's woman you are as hard as nails." Corlyss's eyes were full of genuine tears—the kind of tears that crocodiles are said to shed when emotionally moved.

"Oh! forgive me, Corlyss." Nan sank back on her pillows. Her apology sounded more like abdication of her position as woman to woman than anything else. "You're too moral for me. All the same, I think you took heavy toll of Bob. Certainly you've put him in a shaky position. I can just see how your father is going to respect him and how your mother will naturally regard her new son as one in whom she can trust her only child's future happiness." The sarcasm again pierced Corlyss.

"Don't be nasty, Nan," she said, twisting her new ring. Then: "After all, differences of opinion should not part old friends." This with angelic sweetness. "Seen Joan?"

"No. Joan waits until she's invited to places."

"And misses a lot," Corlyss nodded affably. After a pause she went on, "Nan, did you notice that Joan and Norman Grey were not by the camp fire when I—I told you about Bob and me? I've been wondering where they were."

"Yes, I noticed that." Nancy was on guard. "Later I went up to Joan's room and told her the great news."

"Oh, she *was* in her room!" Corlyss's eyes were like the eyes of a ferret.

"She was, and she thought as I did about your renigging."

Corlyss flushed. "Did you happen to go to Grey's room and tell him my news, too, Nan?"

Nancy sat up rigidly, her eyes flashing. She looked dangerous. "See here, Corlyss," she asked with a calmness that boded no mercy, "what are you trying to do: smear us all with your peculiar and particular shade of morality?"

"No, but I'm no fool. Maybe you did find Joan in her room; maybe Grey was in his, I hope he was, for if you haven't heard I'll tell you. Grey's being sent away, sent to some place where rich men's sons go to recuperate. Something has happened at the bank. I heard this from my father. So!"

Nancy did not speak for a full moment, then she rose and drew herself up to her full height—it wasn't much, but it assumed terrific proportions to Corlyss, who suddenly feared she had defeated all that she had come to accomplish.

"What—what is the matter, Nan?" she queried, reaching for her coat and hat.

"Nothing," Nancy remarked icily, "nothing at all, only I wish you would go now, Corlyss. I want to go on with what I was doing when you came in."

"I'm sorry, Nan, but you pushed me too far. I'm no worse than you and Joan——"

"I thought you were infinitely better," Nancy broke in, "but it's not worth discussing. Good-bye."

Corlyss assembled her coat and hat, reached the

door, and then paused. She had regained all her stupid prettiness, she seemed to have pulled it on with her coat. "I nearly forgot what I came for, Nan. I'm so rattlebrained." She panted a little. "Mother is going to give a big dinner party. Of course you will come."

Nancy considered. Then, "I wouldn't miss it," she said.

"I thought you wouldn't. Good-bye, Nan. Now you can go on with what you were doing before I came in."

"Thanks. And if you cling to the banisters as you go down, you may not knock anything over. And by the way, Corlyss, you do look so pretty and—content. Go a little less jerkily and you may become graceful in time."

Corlyss giggled. Her world was right again. "Dear old Nan, always picking on me. But you might know you cannot make me angry." Corlyss waved a kiss and disappeared.

CHAPTER III

THE winter following Nancy's demoralizing party settled into shape as it was bound to do. After all, nothing really had happened—on the surface!

The Trent dinner acted like an opiate upon doubt or embryo gossip. The appearance there of Joan Radcliffe, Patricia Henley, and Nancy was certainly reassuring, and the carefully selected remarks of Mrs. Trent to intimate friends had a further soothing effect. "Of course," she confided, "dear Bob was too poor to marry. We've always adored the boy, but have felt that he should establish himself before marrying. Our extravagant little girl is rather appalling. However, young people, you know, and new ideals! We must bow before the inevitable. Youth must be served, and the children will come home to live with us. Gained a son, you see. Quite an asset."

Old Mr. and Mrs. Grey did not attend the Trent dinner. They had lost a son. How entirely they had lost him they did not, then, realize, but their hearts were heavy wth anxiety and shame, and they were too simple and sincere to make a pretense.

The dinner on the whole was a success and accomplished what it set out to do, namely, put a seal of surface respectability on the last wild caper of Nancy Holt. After all, it was tolerantly recalled, Nancy usually emerged with nothing more than the smell of smoke

on her reputation. "Her grandfather had the same reckless ways," old friends told each other, "but a better man never lived."

The Greys were among old Mr. Holt's closest friends, and while they deplored Nancy's mad ways, they spoke no word against her. They often thought of her upbringing, the lack of right training. They remembered her gay young parents, the scandalous divorce, the years when, during alternate summers, Nancy was shared by her parents in that very camp in the Adirondacks which, since old Mr. Holt's death, had not been opened until now. "Poor child!" the Greys had always said, when regretting Nancy's wildness.

When Nancy was twelve her parents, within a few months of each other, had died, and the grandfather assumed the care of the little girl. He had loved her, trusted her, given her much liberty and, in dying, left his fortune to her. "A sad background," thought the Greys, then remembering their own son and their own devotion to him, they added, "but one never can tell."

The Trent dinner, in a way, again justified Nancy. Why Nancy did not marry and carry on the traditions of her family—one way or the other—no one could tell. She had all the charms of her wayward parents and she had inherited the brains of her grandfather. Perhaps the conflict of the two inheritances was the cause of the girl's aloofness and her obsession for freedom. She had had lovers, as everyone knew, from the time when she left school. Some had been discarded indifferently enough, others had been wistfully considered and regretfully eliminated.

"It's so nice to have a waiting list," Nancy confided

once to her grandfather. "It's like your fishing, grandfather"—fishing was old Mr. Holt's only dissipation—"throw out your line and feel reasonably sure of a nibble."

"Look out and make sure your line will hold," the old man retorted. "I'd hate to have you prove yourself a poor sport."

This gave Nancy something to think about and she gradually gave up her angling and took to new ways of passing her time. Her admirers came and passed. Definitely, often rudely, she discarded them. She traveled with her grandfather, and, after his death, alone, over Europe and South America. When she was in New York she entertained intermittently but generously, and the only one of her lovers who persisted and dogged her footsteps was young Theodore Roland.

He was a nobody, so the Trents asserted. He lived with his widowed mother on Brooklyn Heights and was the junior member of a law firm. He had been one of the young men old Mr. Holt had approved. Besides fishing, young men were the old man's nearest approach to enjoyment. Nancy made her position very clear to Roland. She had no desire nor intention of playing with him. By the time she was twenty-five she decided that marriage was not for her; something that happened abroad that summer had influenced her.

"I'm not taking advantage of you, Ted?" she often asked; she did not state the fact.

"Lord, no, Nan!" Roland responded quickly. He had accepted what Nancy offered.

"You're handy and quite adorable as an escort, my dear Ted, and I'm grateful to you, but you're sure I'm

not snitching too much? You're not—counting on anything?"

"I'm content, Nan."

Of course he wasn't. He wanted more, wanted her to be as his fancy believed her; but he sagely accepted what was available and bided his time, hoping, as men have a way of hoping, that by making himself necessary to Nancy, by being always understandingly *there* when she called, not making a nuisance of himself as more ardent lovers had, the time would come! Beyond the present Roland had not looked. He was that kind of man. It was strength, not weakness, that upheld him. The cheerful, determined strength that had helped him work his way up and into his firm. He had never touched a dollar of his mother's little income, and lately he had increased it and had made their home possible. Mrs. Roland was the best possible companion for her son. Self-reliant, intelligent, and appreciative, but never possessive. She accepted the present and asked no questions of the future. She had a fairly clear conception of all that was going on between her son and Nancy Holt. Of course she did not approve, but she liked Nancy and, as so many did, trusted her in spite of appearances.

But Nancy's party in the Adirondacks had been, in a way, Roland's undoing. Since then he and Nancy had not met until the Trent dinner. That a woman should consider an offer of marriage an insult rather staggered Roland. That his acceptance of past conditions and his sudden change of base when Corlyss Trent threw her bomb, had had any connection Roland did not pause to weigh. His ideal of Nancy was based upon a construc-

tion wholly his own. He never regarded her as sophisticated, and her antics had merely impressed him as prankish outbursts of a pampered girl who needed watching but whose head and heart were safely balanced. He had taken the big brother rôle for a time, but that Adirondack escapade proved that a husband, not a brother, was needed. So Roland had simply proposed and received a definite slap in the face. He was righteously incensed and proudly retreated.

Nancy had missed him since then, but she had not had time to seriously review his case. She would eventually; at present she was tingling at the memory of some of his direct blows after she had refused him.

"You probably do not realize," he had said, "how things like this party may react upon you and others."

"And that's why you ask me to marry you?" she had flung out. Certainly she had a right to ask that after making her own position clear in the past.

"I love you, Nan, and I *do* want to protect you."

That was fatal. It was then that Nancy hurled her hurting shaft—"I consider your proposal an insult." Then, in an effort to soften the hurt, "Good Lord, Ted, I gave you credit for better sense. I suppose I never should have confused business and—friendship. Well, then, take this to heart. I'm not responsible for any fool ideal you've erected in my image; I'm in no need of rescue or protection and if I were I have too much decency to let any man sacrifice himself for me. You do understand?" This was a drastic method of softening a blow.

Roland, to his credit, was thoroughly angry. His ideal of Nancy survived in spite of her efforts to destroy

it, but there was nothing to do but retreat. "She's one of these damned moderns," he comforted himself, "ignorant and hell-bound for destruction. Rocks ahead! Lord! such girls never even learn the channel." And then from a distance Roland took up his old attitude.

It was at the Trent dinner that Nancy smiled upon Roland for the first time since she had, as she believed, "put him in his place." She was rather appalled at the aspect of Roland "in his place." He fitted in so admirably. He had never looked in better health, never looked handsomer. How could she know that his very wise mother had entered the lists with her and was training her son in a new set of tactics?

"After all," Mrs. Roland had suggested, "it's well to appear undefeated with such a girl as you believe Nancy to be." It had been an effort, but Roland had succeeded alarmingly well.

There was dancing after the Trent dinner and it was a good half hour before Roland casually came to Nancy and asked her if she cared to try a round with him.

Try a round with him? Why, they danced marvelously together. Had Roland forgotten? And had she really been wrong in thinking that Roland had loved her, had not asked her to marry him in order to shield her? She had secretly flattered herself that he had broken bounds from love, not loyalty—but certainly no rejected lover had a right to look as Roland was looking. Sleek, content, more like a man who had honorably escaped than one who had been banished to misery.

"I hope you're not laying it up against me, Ted?" she asked as they floated around.

"For refusing to marry me, Nan? Heavens, no!

Your system and method were pretty rough, but they were honest enough."

"I'm often a beast, Ted, when I'm edgy."

"Is an offer of marriage so—devastating to your guarded position, Nancy?"

"Ted, I was never asked before to marry anyone; I've always been able to avert the catastrophe. I will say that for my credit. You got past my defenses in disguise. My outposts were weakened, for I thought you were a friend. Can you see?"

"Your defenses are rotten, Nancy. I advise you not to trust them."

"I'm not asking for advice, Ted."

"Very well. Shall we take another turn?"

"Yes."

"By the way, why should a friend *not* propose to a girl?"

"Not—my friends."

"I see."

Then, after a silence, while they swayed rhythmically, "Please, Ted, if you can, and at the same time keep your self-respect, do be my friend."

"Gladly, far, far too gladly!" Then: "By the way, Joan looks off color. Have you noticed?"

Nancy turned to look in Joan's direction. "She does look pale. I wonder if you knew Grey had gone to South America?"

"Yes, sent. I've heard." Roland shrugged his shoulders.

"Anything shady, Ted? Really, I mean?"

"Slightly tinted, perhaps. Don't let's discuss it."

"I wonder if Joan cares?"

"I hope not. Joan Radcliffe is too fine—for him."

"Joan—why, Joan is my closest friend, Ted. I guess I know *that.*" Then in an outburst: "Damn that party of mine!"

At this Roland had a distinct rise in his spiritual temperature.

And so the dinner's effect spread. But once having her attention called to Joan, Nancy could not disregard the fact that Joan was pale and much thinner. Characteristically, she forgot her own troubles and began to worry about Joan. She felt in some distorted way that she was responsible for all the outcome of her camp fiasco. Corlyss's marriage, Roland's proposal, Joan's pallor and loss of flesh—everything!

Nancy came out of retirement and devoted several hours each day to Joan. Joan laughed to scorn any doubts as to her perfect health and rushed into pleasures rather madly to prove how wrong Nancy was, but Patricia, more subtle than Nancy, was also on guard.

It was after Christmas that she suggested, "Let's go to Europe."

"Not now, Grandy; in the spring, perhaps."

"Then go slower here, Joan. It's the height of folly to act as if this winter were the only winter you're likely to prance through."

A look, almost of fear, darted across Joan's face.

"I wonder now if it *is* Norman Grey?" Patricia secretly thought. "If it is she will get over that. I suppose her pride is hurt."

For after all the precautions the Grey family had taken, Norman's flight into distance was, as Roland said, slightly tinted and Joan realized it.

Being worried about Joan made it incumbent upon Patricia to reënforce herself at every angle. Joan's silences and reservations, of course, must be respected. If her pride were involved any intrusion would naturally be resented. "I've learned my lesson," Patricia thought. She had not, she had simply learned not to betray herself. So while she brooded over Joan she did so behind a screen of indifference. She played bridge to excess and got tickets for every new play. Joan was usually eager to share the theater seats. In this way Patricia managed to watch Joan without arousing the girl's suspicions.

Something *was* the matter with Joan! Patricia, having accepted that, did not ignore it, but she veiled her anxiety and curbed her impatience. Of course, at the right moment she would take command. She had always done that—life had molded her, forced her into that rôle, and she had great patience. She had acquired that. When her dissolute husband deserted her she had not flinched. She had taken her child, Joan's mother, and entered the ranks of self-supporting women without a moan, head up. She had used her connections, family and social, as assets not only for herself, but for others. She had opened a private school that soon became famous. Every cent at her command had gone into the venture. She accepted only the daughters of the rich and socially select, and she meted out in full measure the equivalent of what she received.

The school not only proved a financial success, but it opened a road for social advantages. Joan's mother, lovely and entirely under Patricia's domination, was

accepted by the families whose daughters were fortunate enough to be accepted by Patricia.

In due time Margaret Henley had an offer of marriage.

"But I—I do not love him," Margaret put up a futile protest, her first and only one. Patricia had not wasted much time over that objection, but she did share with her daughter, then, her own wretched experience with so-called love. She touched upon her brave efforts to overcome obstacles, her success, etc., and asked if Margaret were going to defeat her now that she had an opportunity to be of help?

At that time Patricia had never known the necessity of gloving the mailed hand, nor of concealing her methods, and Margaret was *hers!* Margaret, conceived and born during the time of Patricia's illusions, trained during the years of Patricia's disillusionment, shrank now from dealing a blow in defense of so vague a thing as her preference and instincts.

What Patricia saw in the man who wanted to marry her daughter was a weakling, attractive enough, but, above all else, the son of rich and influential parents. A means to an upward step. His weakness was his best attribute. His people favored Margaret; their money and position, on one flank, would hold the son to a steady course; Patricia, on the other flank, would steer Margaret safely to a position in which so brittle a thing as love would be relegated to its proper niche or discarded entirely. But Patricia was outwitted by something intangible, something she had never suspected—her daughter's pride and the weakling's brutality. Once married, Margaret did not look back. Once married,

the father of Joan, not having courage to defy power, used every secret and cruel means to humiliate and torture the girl whose fineness and silence soon bored him, but from whom he dared not seek separation.

And then, when Joan was born, Patricia, with all concealments removed, saw the results of her masterful interpretation of another's life. The realization did not change her nature, but it changed her methods. Margaret, as death approached, withheld nothing. She had everything to gain by confession, nothing to lose. She disclosed horrors that in Patricia's experience had never been equalled, and then with all the strength and vision of the dying, Margaret implored Patricia to take her child and save her from as pitiful a fate as her own.

"You'll be lonely, Mother, without me." Patricia listened, she could not speak. "You alone can make life secure for my baby because, seeing where you failed with me, you will not fail with her!"

Again Patricia faced life with uplifted head. She then and there put on the velvet glove where the baby Joan was concerned, and she never took it off! Within a year after Margaret's death Joan's father died. After that there was no interference with Patricia's rights. In time Joan received the money that would have been her father's. Patricia saw that it was well invested and that Joan was early taught that she was independent. But was she? Behind every effort to impress upon Joan her freedom was the determination, born of experience, to avert any tendency on Joan's part to defeat her own best good. Patricia anticipated any paternal inheritance and guarded against maternal ones. Joan was encouraged to express herself, to live her own life. By her

method Patricia realized, beyond her hopes, success.

Joan's love and confidence were early established and Patricia, always close, always watchful, learned to accept new standards, new ideals, while still holding to her own. She knew the values of life, did she not? No young madness ever deceived her. To know how to deal with madness until it passed was Patricia's specialty, and so now, silently, observantly, she watched Joan, watched her most while apparently most indifferent. There were verities in life, whatever changing customs played upon them. The verities concerned Patricia, and that Joan did not acknowledge them only added to her determination.

So now, watching Joan, Patricia felt the twitching of muscles in her daintily disguised hand. Joan meant everything in life to her, not sentimentally but actually. She was her vindication, her proof of a remorse that had strengthened her, not conquered her. Joan was a hope for the future. Joan was loyal, sincere, and affectionate. While Joan lived there would be no desolate old age. Joan was hers! Bought by a price that no one suspected.

And Joan believed herself free; Joan believed that she, not Patricia, knew life. Well, Patricia was content. She had been content, in Joan's childhood, to see the love for a Scotch nurse supersede the love for herself. Patricia had chosen the nurse! During those years she had other work to do for Joan's future. Patricia was building and ornamenting that future, and when the time came the nurse had been generously pensioned and sent away. Oh! Patricia knew what she was about. The best schools were chosen, the most promising girls

encouraged as friends, and all this Joan had never suspected. She did not suspect it now.

"Grandy must be protected," she thought. "He who chooses the tune——" Joan could still smile; she had much of Patricia in her.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS a warm, springlike day when Joan went to walk in the park alone. There is no weather so enervating as untimely spring weather. Joan tried to reassure herself by this knowledge; she felt spent and bewildered. Where were all her brave ideals and convictions? Where was her vaunted declaration as to the Piper and his legitimate price? They had all oozed away.

Sitting on a park bench, for she had become suddenly too weak and giddy to walk farther, Joan succumbed to an overwhelming depression, a contempt for herself, and a helpless acknowledgment of defeat. When one awakens to the awful truth that Nature, God, call it what you will, is too great for you, that you cannot trick it nor cajole it, there is a moment of utter soul loneliness difficult to endure. Later comes acceptance, readjustment, success or defeat, but at the moment of realization the loneliness overpowers all else.

Joan had come to her first Gethsemane—life has so many for most of us!—and where were her vaunted "conclusions," her new ideals, her brave philosophies? She and her kind believed themselves so wise, so different. That was what hurt most: the *difference,* or the hideous lack of it. All the time God had been smiling, or, more likely, sneering at her and her "difference." God knew, Nature knew, no one would escape the inevitable.

She, Joan Radcliffe, was no different from any wayward, defiant girl of any age. When it came to grips with the inevitable there was but one result. That her body and senses had dragged her to her doom did not count. That was the pity of it. Did God take heed of that, too? The mind of Joan Radcliffe considered this aspect. It couldn't change things, but it might make her feel less lonely to ask questions.

Just then a woman sat down on the other end of Joan's bench. A poor, draggled creature carrying a heavy basket of laundry. She put her burden down and turned upon Joan the terrible secret look of the poor who know life at close range and without any disguises. She was a kindly soul, though, and Joan puzzled her. Why all that tragedy and—fear? Certainly there was no lack of money—Joan exuded prosperity. What, then? The woman turned the question over in her mind. Likely the young lady was one of them who—hated maternity. Well, there might be reasons for that, but where ease and comfort could help along one need not look so tragic. And then the woman spoke:

"It's a warm day, ma'am, and in the wrong time of year. It takes it out of you, ma'am, and that's a fact."

Joan lifted her troubled eyes. "Yes, it does," she said faintly.

"It will pass, the sinking feeling, ma'am. Take heart. And if you'd like I can walk with you to the gate—it's just round the curve. You'll get a cab there."

The poor soul with her heavy load never thought in terms of cabs for herself, but for such as the girl near her cabs were a solution of many hard moments.

"You're very kind." At that instant Joan clung to the

shabby woman as a drowning person might to anything that suggested stability. "Yes, please walk as far as the gate with me," she said.

The woman picked up her basket and offered Joan her free hand. "Lean on me," she suggested.

Joan, conscious of the woman's bent body and the heavy basket, wanted to laugh or cry—she felt so aware of all that was going on in the stranger's mind, too. It frightened her.

The path wound between high bushes and just past the curve were the gates, and outside were several empty cabs.

"Let me take you to where you are going," Joan had the grace to say, but the woman gave a shrug.

"Thanks, ma'am, cabs ain't for the likes of me. If I rode in one to where I'm going me job wouldn't be worth much. Thanks all the same." The woman hesitated and then spoke rapidly, for the cabman was opening the door and Joan had seemed friendly. "Take it from me, ma'am, you'll live to thank the Lord if you act decent and right."

Joan remembered afterward that she had pressed a bill in the woman's hand, even while she felt the words hurting her like physical things which she resented. As the cab rattled along and the faintness passed, Joan was aware of the deep significance of the woman's words. They sank into her conscience, combating some hateful, dangerous thing that had been festering in darkness in her mind for weeks.

"Act decent and right." Joan quivered resentfully, then braced herself mentally. She was no coward, that was something to be grateful for. In all honesty she had

been struggling to find the best and wisest way out. It was not necessarily the coward's way. It might be the brave way. And if that woman knew, perhaps Patricia, others knew! Had she left things too long, would she be obliged to let others pay, after all her foolish prating and thinking?

Somehow this thought of delay and its consequences braced, rather than dismayed, Joan. She would not hesitate a minute longer, she would at least minimize the danger. If she must—and she could tell by Patricia's face—if she *must* take her grandmother into her confidence she would do so not as a whimpering girl but as a woman, an understanding one, and Patricia would leave her alone. More than anything else Joan wanted to be left alone—to plan, rearrange her life, and take a stand. Patricia would not fail her along this line.

The cab stopped before her house. Quite steadily she paid the man and walked into the cool dim hall.

Patricia, dressed for out-of-doors, was standing by the open window of the library, drawing on long white gloves. She looked calm, rather bored with the unaccountable weather, but otherwise reassuring enough. She looked at Joan with frank but unworried eyes—the glance was like balm to Joan's nerves.

"My dear," said Patricia, "we must make plans for the summer. It's only February, I know, but heat and discomfort at any time cause me to take warning. Will you come to Europe with me? I'll make reservations while I am out to-day. Lord! how my gloves stick."

Certainly Patricia could be eliminated from present danger. Relieved, Joan dropped into a chair and tossed her hat aside. "Where are you going now, Grandy?"

This gave a moment in which to think and take a long breath.

"A committee meeting. I'm on the Board of the Children's Vacation Society, you know. I'd like to send hundreds of those poor little creatures up to Margot's farm in Maine, but it's too far."

Margot! Maine! The words seemed to cut through a wall, letting in light and a possible means of escape. Margot was Joan's old Scotch nurse. Patricia, years ago, had given the farm in Maine to Margot and had set aside a sum, the interest of which, while Margot lived, would suffice for her wants. Patricia had taken Joan to visit Margot several times, but not of recent years. Margot had never come to visit Patricia.

Margot! Maine!

"Well—Joan, what do you say about Europe?" Patricia turned her well-groomed and beautiful body around. Her eyes were cool and smiling. They were hiding all Patricia's anxiety and yearning, not disclosing them.

"Grandy, would you think me utterly ungrateful and stupid—if I declined? Truly—the very thought of the beaten and unbeaten tracks of Europe make my feet ache and my head dizzy."

"We might find some new trails. There are some, doubtless, and you and I have proved good pioneers—in the past."

"Margot! Maine!" The clock striking the half hour seemed to use the words for strokes.

"And what would *you* do if I went alone?" Patricia moved toward the door.

"I'd like to go up to Maine."

At this Patricia paused. "Maine? Why, Joan, certainly you and I have graduated from summer resorts and the debaucheries of piazzas."

"I was thinking of—Margot."

"Margot?" At this Patricia laughed—a little sigh caught and strangled the laugh. Then she laughed again and said: "Dear me! I have been neglecting Margot. I do not believe I sent her her check this month. But, Joan, you cannot be serious. Margot fills her place every summer with children, she has a passion for them. Rather a ragtag and shabby lot, I hear. 'Give me the worst' is Margot's slogan. Of course you are joking, Joan?"

But Joan was thinking fast—backward and forward her memory leaped like a bewildering will-o'-the-wisp. Margot of the long-ago days, how comforting she had been, how safely she could tuck one up at night. Margot with her funny ways, always knowing things before you confessed them. Margot with her strange religion, her endless goodness. It was early, Margot might not have made any summer plans, she might be willing.

"No, I'm not joking. Grandy, I mean it!"

At this Patricia, her hand on the door, considered. "Of course, a word from me and Margot would do everything for you, Joan. It might not be such a bad idea, after all. You certainly look sorely in need of quiet, care, and fresh milk, vegetables—everything that is prescribed by doctors for foolish, headstrong girls." Patricia was rallying her forces and doing some rapid thinking. If Joan were still brooding over Norman Grey—and there were some disquieting tales concerning him

floating about—it would do her good to be with Margot. She would probably talk to Margot, old habit might assert itself. Margot was a simple, wise creature, a splendid nurse and faithful to a fault. In case——

"And you would not mind going abroad alone, Grandy?" Joan's voice brought Patricia back to the present.

"I never go abroad alone, Joan. I can easily make connections. But when would you want to go to Maine?"

"You'll surely think I'm crazy, Grandy, but I'd like to go now."

At this Patricia went to the nearest chair, sat down, and pulled off her gloves. "I doubt if you could get there now," she said. "The snow lasts late in Maine and it's been a hard winter."

"They must get about themselves, Grandy. What I really need, darling, is to be up against it for a while. I'm flabby. I'm getting excited already. The very thought of Maine, Margot, and the simple life thrills me. It's wonderful, Grandy, to have you so understandable and—and tractable." Joan verged upon hysteria.

Patricia was again drawing on her gloves, they absorbed her. "Maybe you could corral Nancy Holt to go along." Patricia ignored the compliments.

"That would spoil everything, Grandy. Nancy would debauch Margot."

"Nancy is sensible in spite of her folly, Joan."

"Margot is sensible enough. I really want the thing undiluted, Grandy, if I have it at all. By June I may be fed up, and if I am I'll join you if you want me, in—— Where will you be in June or July, Grandy?"

Patricia had not gone, mentally, into details. "Oh! I

may take a Mediterranean trip," she ventured. "Sailing almost at once—you've set me off. In that case I'll make out an itinerary for you, Joan. Now I *must* go! Think this over, we'll settle it this evening." And Patricia made a strategic retreat.

Left alone, Joan went up to her room, put on a pretty negligee and stretched out upon the couch. The weather was changing, a cool little breeze was already stirring and changing the temperature of the room.

Patricia was filling Joan's thought. How lovely she had looked, how eager to give her anything, everything that would make her happy! Never a selfish thought, always so understanding and unknowing! Then, as such grotesque mental pictures often form on the borderland of waking and sleeping, Joan saw Patricia and herself as Patricia believed her, as Joan herself had once believed herself—standing alone, she was shielding Patricia from something. What was it? The borderland was crossed now, Joan slept exhaustedly, but the picture remained and became part of a troubled dream.

Joan seemed haggling with someone, pushing Patricia away as she haggled. A tall gaunt figure with poised pipes and outstretched hands was waiting, listening to words, Joan's words. "But I have nothing with which to pay!" The extended hand did not withdraw and Joan knew that the debt must be paid, but that Patricia must be spared.

The confusion persisted, it was carrying Joan on, farther and farther. She was pleading now to an outstretched hand, nothing but a Hand. She was alone, terribly, hopelessly alone in a strange, bleak place with

that outstretched, demanding hand. What a nightmare!

Suddenly Joan sat up. Something terrific had startled her, had brought her back to her room, to familiar things. She was quite cold and the room was dark. Then came a peal of thunder. It was that which had brought her back to earth. To the place of safety!

As reason took command Joan sat still, waiting. And then she felt the life within her life, stir! She was not alone, she never would be again. Whatever happened, whatever there was to pay, she and another must meet the obligation. She and another! It was plain enough now; no doubt, no possibility, of escape.

"I will write to Margot at once." Joan spoke aloud and rose giddily from the couch. She closed the windows against which the rain was dashing crazily. She drew a chair to the desk and began her letter.

That letter created a sensation in Margot Fleming's house, known among the Maine farmers as "Off the Road."

Off the road it certainly was. A good half mile separated it from the highway, and it was five miles from the railroad station and the group of houses known as The Center. The farm had three hundred acres of meadow, woodland, and, as Margot proudly added, "open spaces." The open spaces were her special delights. She had no responsibility there and could "let herself go."

For Patricia Henley, Margot Fleming held an old-world ideal of devotion and loyalty. She always referred to Patricia as "my lady," and though America had implanted many new and admirable traits in Margot,

it had not entirely altered her attitude of mind regarding differences in people.

"Off the Road" had been bought by Mrs. Henley as an indefinite investment which at last resolved itself into a home and occupation for Margot. Margot had spent the best years of her life in Mrs. Henley's service; she had been shown kindness and appreciation. Patricia had even gone so far as to have Margot take a course in nursing, once her actual service to Joan was over. Then, when asked what she would like to do upon her retirement from Mrs. Henley's household, Margot had replied:

"I'd like to go back to the soil, my lady."

"To Scotland?" Patricia asked.

"No, my lady. My near kin are dead. I've learned the ways of a new land——"

"But your training, Margot. Would you not like to be a nurse? You would be so independent!"

Margot shook her head. "I'm thinking I'd know more independence, my lady, on a wee place of my own. The ailing and needy could find me there, I'd be always ready for them as came."

And so it was that "Off the Road" was turned over to Margot. Independence was secured and, had the place been farther from neighbors than it was, the sick and troubled people would have found her and brought to her their needs.

While Margot fully gave of her service and silent sympathy, she did not encourage social intercourse. "I'm a lonely creature," she explained. "And I like best to be so. I'm ever free then for answering a call."

Margot tilled the land with the help of men ready

enough to repay her in service for her hours or days of nursing. She guarded the woodland and humanly respected the rights of trees. If one was elected to fall it was brought down with regret and another was planted in its place. "Memory trees," Margot called them. The open spaces seemed to Margot her perquisites. In them she reveled, for they were void of trees and the soil was poor. But the views were splendid and when Margot was body- and soul-weary she would watch a sunrise or sunset from an open space and return to her little red house, restored.

When her position was assured, Margot gradually indulged her one weakness. Summer after summer she sent for children. "Give me the worst," she asked the different societies and then added, "I mean the least likely."

For eight weeks, in turn they came to her—"the least likely," and what Margot did for those children is only recorded for Last Day glory. Margot was a rare sort, the children knew her best. Joan had learned that!

"Now, lads and lassies," she would proclaim, gathering each new installment about her, "the garden places and the trees are holy spots and you must keep hands and feet in control there, but in the open spaces you can let yourselves go—there'll be no one but the God who made you to interfere there." It was remarkable how some of the least likely responded.

Into such a life and home Joan's letter entered.

"And now," said Margot, rereading Joan's letter, "it's my little lady who is ailing and is coming to me." Margot raised her neat checked apron and wiped her

eyes, "and alone!" There was mystery about it, and Margot was thrilled.

"I'll give the summer to my lass," she concluded, "or as much as she wants of it." And then Margot set to work and made the little red house shine. She sought dirt where dirt was not: the small panes of glass in the windows glittered; hearths were swept and loads of wood carried in, for winter was still gripping Maine with no gentle hand. The snow rested on the hills, but the days were getting longer. Then, having set her home in order, Margot baked and roasted until her shelves were filled. Finally, tired and expectant, she tramped to one of her open spaces and asked God what it all meant. It meant something. Margot was intimate with the God she accepted.

"If I'm His child," she reasoned, "He'll naturally enough want me to know the meaning of His doings." Margot's prayers were not worded—she simply stood, or sat, in her open space, her questions filling mind and heart, and listened. It was marvelous the answers she received. They came silently—she simply *knew*.

"My lass is coming to me in trouble." That was enough. Margot waited.

And in the meanwhile Joan rather breathlessly made her arrangements to depart. Patricia decided upon a Mediterranean trip; she had discovered some boon companions who were delighted to have her join them. The house was to be closed, the servants were given an unexpected holiday, and Joan decided to slip away unobserved and for once in her well-regulated life to know the freedom of the unwatched and unfindable. Patricia was to sail on March first, a maid remained to see to

Joan's wants, and Joan was to start for Maine the week after Patricia sailed.

In a vague way people thought Joan was accompanying Patricia—those sudden trips were no new things. Nancy at least took it for granted, and bade Joan goodbye three days before the sailing.

"I never see people off, you know," she explained. "I'd be a stowaway if I did."

The shades of the front windows were drawn, no lights showed at night. The maid slipped in and out unobserved and Joan was ready for the first great and lonely adventure of life. It was her last afternoon at home—she was to go on the night train. At five o'clock the outer bell rang and as was her custom Corlyss Martin, following the maid at close range, determinedly came upon Joan in her retirement.

The sight of Corlyss was almost more than Joan could endure. She physically shrank from it, but there was Corlyss and not to be denied.

CHAPTER V

JOAN had been undergoing one of those black hours of temptation such as our Garden of Gethsemane alone can evolve. With the going of Patricia the only tangible hold on the safe and happy past seemed to drop away. On the open sea with no chart to guide her, tossed by doubt and fear, Joan was contemplating the pros and cons of her situation.

There was Norman Grey at the other end of the cable! That was perhaps the easiest way out. She could slip away to South America after cabling. In the end, everyone might be better off and her marriage just another escapade. Joan felt confident that Grey would do his part. To be sure, disturbing items of news were drifting about concerning him, "Drink and women!" But Grey would welcome her and perhaps she might be the means of "saving him." Joan was at low ebb when the maid announced indignantly:

"Here's Mrs. Martin, Miss Joan," and in her blustering, frank way Corlyss entered. She slammed the door after her, nearly hitting the maid, and dislodging a small picture from the wall by her methods.

"You see, Joan, you can't fool me! A friend of mine went down to see her mother off on Mrs. Henley's ship and she saw you standing on the pier."

Joan, weak from struggle, made no effort at explanation. "Well, here I am," she simply admitted.

"What's the big idea?" Corlyss tossed her coat aside.

"You won't mind, Corlyss, will you, if I decline to answer?"

"Of course I'll mind. You're my very dearest friend, Joan. I've just naturally come to you. Of course I mind that you do not feel toward me as I feel toward you."

"I'm sorry, Corlyss."

"You *are not!* But keep it to yourself if you want to —I'm one who believes in living and letting live."

"Don't be inane, Corlyss; somehow I cannot stand it to-day. I'm tired."

"Going to bat alone while Mrs. Henley is abroad? I wonder at her letting you." Corlyss's hard eyes glittered.

"Do you?" Joan turned to the bell. "Let's have some tea," she suggested.

"Let's, Joan. Tea is so—democratic."

After the tea was placed upon a small table and the gloomy maid departed, Corlyss broke forth: "Joan, I may seem frivolous and addle-pated to some, but I guess you will understand. I'm up against it!"

"Up against what?" Joan sipped her tea and fixed her grave young eyes on Corlyss's flushed face.

"I know, Joan, I'm a—a rather complex person, but I have a conscience, a high sense of—duty along some lines."

"Yes?" Joan tried to keep a sneer from her voice.

"Don't be nasty, Joan. I've come to you for help. You do believe in following the dictates of your conscience, don't you, Joan?"

"Yes, granting that one *has* a conscience and knows what it is dictating."

"You're making things difficult for me, Joan." Corlyss managed a tear or two. "I may have to take a stand," she faltered, "make a decision. A woman cannot be swept off her feet—by a man's whims, now can she?"

"I've seen them swept——" Joan got up and opened a window. It was strange, but she always felt that she must open a window when Corlyss was in the room.

"That's a direct draught, Joan."

"Change your seat—no! Wait, I'll put a screen between you and the window. I'm rather fond of direct draughts. There!" Joan returned to her couch.

"I want my best friends to stand by me." Corlyss actually had more tears in her eyes. She looked so pretty and helpless and—innocent that for a moment Joan softened.

"Maybe they will, Corlyss," she said. "We're not an unreasonable lot. What's threatening?"

Corlyss was braced by the words. "It may not come to the break, Joan, the thing may be averted if I am definite and—firm." Corlyss did not look as if she could be either, but Joan waited. "I've only been married a little over four months, Joan, but Bob has begun acting up. Trying to act like a—a he-man, a husband, you know the rôle."

A vision of poor, bewildered Bob Martin assuming any such rôle as Corlyss depicted was almost too comic to contemplate with seriousness.

"He says he wants his own home! Fancy, Joan, that means a five-room flat and a woman by the hour. Bob makes so little that it isn't worth mentioning and Father absolutely refuses to finance two establishments, and I

uphold him in that. Bob says he feels like a parasite in my home. Just think what an insult, after all my people have done for him. And"—Corlyss's tears dried as if by some inner process of heat—"what's more, Bob has sprung the baby trick on me. He wants children, Joan. He got funny and talked duty and asked me what I got married for, anyway!"

"What did you tell him?" Joan stopped the flow of words so suddenly that Corlyss took a mental tumble.

"What would any decent girl say to such a question?" she blurted.

"I'd like to hear." Joan looked grave and sympathetic, but Corlyss was distrustful.

"You can't sidetrack me," she said, and ran ahead: "Just think of me in a five-room flat—with babies. Babies! Just fancy, when you think of it—sitting opposite *any* man day in and out in a five-room flat, and babies always in the offing! It wouldn't be decent, Joan. One must be consistent. Now I have put it up to Bob fair and square. I flatter myself that I do play a fair game. When he can provide a home such as I am used to I will consider the matter. As to children, well—I'm not keen about them but under some conditions I might——"

"And suppose Bob refuses your proposition?" Joan was interested now, in spite of her contempt for Corlyss. Again the question produced a tumble.

"How brutal you are, Joan!" Then, snatching at anything in sight, she flung out, "After all your smart talk about the sanctity of divorce and personal independence, too. Much you and Nancy can be depended upon when it comes to tests!"

Joan flinched as she might have had some furious child dealt her a blow. "Smart talk!" she repeated dully. "I guess you're more right than you realize, Corlyss. We all talk smart talk that cannot stand tests. But look here, Corlyss, I don't know why you married Bob, you must have had *some* reason. Can't you stand by it now and try to make a success of the thing?"

"In a five-room flat with a baby?" Corlyss turned on her. "You must be mad, Joan, or you take me for a fool. I've often heard you say that divorce was as honorable as marriage——"

"In many cases more so," Joan broke in.

"Then why are you grilling me now, Joan?"

"Corlyss, I'm doing nothing to you, this is your affair, just as your silly, cowardly marriage was. You're selfish, a natural-born smasher. Now you know what I think. You used Bob to suit your purposes. You're going to do the same now—that's that and it's up to you!" Joan was genuinely angry.

Corlyss rose with a pitiful attempt at dignity. She too was angry in her small ineffective way, and it made her nose red. "A woman must follow her conscience and take a stand, no matter how bitter the struggle may be, not only for herself——" She paused, and Joan pleaded:

"Oh, Corlyss, spare me."

But Corlyss ran on: "My parents will stand by me." She moved toward the door.

"They may have to," Joan spoke on, "as they had to stand by your marriage." She followed Corlyss to the door. "It's rather low, I think, to—to make others

pay and pay for one's own folly." Her words trailing after the silent Corlyss.

At the stairs Corlyss turned. "Just what are you up to, Joan?" she asked.

For a moment Joan in self-defense considered taking the girl into her partial confidence, begging her not to tell where she was going, but a second thought bade her keep her own counsel. Corlyss was not to be trusted, even with partial confidences. "I'm up to—to my own affairs," she said quietly, "as you are up to yours. You know there is honor, they say, among thieves?"

This Corlyss thought over as she returned home. "Joan will bear watching," she concluded. Joan had never interested Corlyss seriously before. She had always seemed so transparent—so unsubtle. Corlyss believed herself exceedingly subtle.

"You never *can* tell!" she thought on. Then: "I wager she's going to skip to South America. There's something between her and Norman Grey. You can't fool me! That was pretty thin about Nancy finding Joan in her room that night up at the lodge and Norman not accounted for. I bet . . ." And Corlyss's eyes glittered as her soiled and rumpled little mind called forth possibilities. "And Nan, too! Better-than-thou trick. Well, at least I deal honestly with things. I do not dodge and hide. Nothing underhand about me. I'm thankful that I have some ideals that I stand by." Then: "I got married and saved everything, I can steer a clean course now!"

Left to herself, Joan drew a long breath and walked about her room. Something of Corlyss remained, some-

thing tangible, something that was convincing Joan of how near she had been to a precipice. It was Corlyss who had saved her, not by dragging her back, but by standing in front of her.

"I really was estimating the chances of Norman and South America!" she thought. "I really was." Then: "And it would have been a repetition of Corlyss—I'd have slipped more and more, clutched at all the hideous means of escape." After a pause, "I am more like Corlyss than I care to be, but there *is* a difference."

"What is the difference?" This was something to think about. Perhaps it lay in gripping things and going ahead, not letting go and slipping, depending upon others to haul you back. "Norman Grey shall never pay —never!"

At this Joan knew that the temptation was conquered. That, with its hideous subterfuges which Corlyss was accepting one by one. Then something rather fine came to Joan as she sat alone in her darkening room. It was like a ray of light entering in from some unknown quarter. She knew that at last her two selves were getting closer together! The vagrant senses had taught her mind, her soul, the truth about things and she meant to go on, on—just where it didn't matter. But on!

Joan faced these conclusions determinedly. She didn't mean to retrace a step. She was different from Corlyss; she was herself. With this conviction arrived at she began to arrange for the immediate future. By noon, or a little later, she would be with Margot. South America vanished. What must she tell Margot, and how?

Joan recalled that in her childhood, when she went to Margot with a confession, Margot always took up a bit of work or a book—this was such a happy way to deal with a confession. Eyes hurt so when you were trying to lay your soul bare. Margot knew that. Patricia had always *looked* so steadfastly at one, but not Margot! Joan hoped that Margot on the morrow would take up a bit of work. And then what?

It wasn't easy. Over and over Joan practiced methods of confiding in Margot, recalling with a kind of tenderness Margot's old ways and her words. How clearly it all came back.

"Now, lass, tell it in your own way—but go slow and steady."

Well, there wasn't much to tell, after all, and she would go slow and steady. Margot would stand by her, for Patricia's sake if no other—had she always, unconsciously, counted upon someone forever standing by her? Would she and the girls she knew be so reckless if they knew that in all the world there was no one with power and wisdom to stand by them? This did not get Joan very far upon her way, so she set about packing her handbag. She meant to eat her dinner on the train. The hours dragged on, but they passed, and at last with a tug and many pants the Maine Express drew out of the Grand Central Station. After all, the going was like the first steps of an operation. Doubt was past, one had to go through it.

It was well on into the afternoon of the next day when Joan reached "Off the Road." She had not telegraphed a definite hour to Margot. "I'll be there the latter part of the week." Margot had been content

with this. "It's the lass's way," was her only remark.

Joan paid and dismissed the man who had driven her up from the station, her bags were piled on the stone step by the front door. Apparently her approach had not been heard. Joan walked around the house; the late sun was shining ruddily in the west. It had done its best all day to warm the air, but a chill was creeping up now.

Margot was feeding her chickens. They cluttered and pressed around her; pigeons whirled and flew above her head, some settled on her shoulders. It was a beautiful sight. Joan watched it from her corner and smiled. Margot was not much changed. Tall, gaunt, but kindly featured and with a certain grace of movement.

The scene was like some quaint old picture. It was sheer joy to stand there looking at it, not touching it, not getting too close.

"She's like Grandy," Joan thought. "Ageless—but safer!" Queer! Just why should that thought enter in? "Nothing can really get past Margot. Nothing that she does not want to let go by."

The wings flapped about Margot's feet; other wings, white, circling wings of pigeons, hovering over her head. Wings, wings, and Margot laughing and scattering food!

"Oh, Margot, Margot!"

For a moment the woman and the wings seemed to stop movement. Then Margot turned slowly and looked at Joan. The girl had changed from a tall, reedy creature not yet developed into a lovely thing of furs, close little hat framing a wistful, tired face and outstretched arms—a woman! Margot beat off the wings, she

brushed through the cluttering, crowding hens. Her dogs barked; a cat ran away; and then Joan was in the strong, defending arms. Nothing could get past them. Blessed thought. There didn't seem to be anything to tell.

The bags were at last placed in the east chamber and unpacked, their contents stowed in sweet-scented drawers and closets. Lavender, sweet, haunting scent. There had been a delectable meal before the roaring fire in the living room—Margot had no dining room. All the things that Joan had forgotten in the way of table dainties Margot had placed before her, and now a clock in the next room was striking.

"Ten o'clock!" Margot spoke as in the old, old days. "Too late by far for the likes of you to be up. Off to bed, lass. There's to-morrow, you know."

But Joan did not move. "I think, Margot," she faltered, "I think I will not wait until to-morrow to tell you something, if you do not mind."

Instantly Margot, who had got up, reseated herself, laid a log on the fire—and took up her knitting! "As you will, lass," she said, settling with downcast eyes to her work.

Joan waited, trying to find the best way to begin.

"Tell me in your own way, child," Margot helped along; "there's all the time there is.'

"Margot, I am going to have a baby!"

"I—sensed it, my dear." Still the comfort of those lowered eyes, the busy, careful hands. "Are you married, Joan?" This had a gleam of hope in it—perhaps Joan had kept a distasteful marriage from Patricia Henley.

"No, Margot."

"And—are you to be, lass?"

"No. I do not want to marry the man, Margot. He does not know. I hope he never will. I—I never loved him, really." There was no resentment, anger, nor defeat in Joan's voice—it carried conviction with it. Margot nodded over her work.

"Very well, lass. There is no use in making anything harder. And my lady—does she know?"

"No, Margot. She must never know if it can be helped."

Margot turned her knitting and began a new row. "That may be doing her a great wrong, my dear. My lady, in her day, has had her trials—I cannot bear to have her hurt through you. She so sets her all upon you."

"This is not going to—to alter my life greatly, Margot. That's why I do not want Grandy to know."

At this Margot smiled an inscrutable smile and for a moment lifted her eyes. "God's made that an impossibility, Joan," she said definitely, and went on with her knitting.

"Margot, times have changed, you know."

"But almighty truths haven't, my dear."

"I mean, Margot—a woman doesn't have to pay all her life, as once she did"—this came almost defiantly.

"Not, perhaps, as once she did—but she pays." Evidently Margot was not going to make a false start.

"Perhaps," Joan compromised. Then: "Margot, I have come to you. You will let me—stay? You'll—see me through?" After all, how few words and phrases there were to cover such a situation.

Margot folded her knitting and put it in the bag

hanging from the arm of her chair. There were always bags of work hanging on Margot's chairs. "When all's said and done, Joan," she said with a kind of fierce sternness, "there is the child. Through all this you've been talking of the man you cannot marry, your own rights, the fear of causing my lady trouble, but no word of the little child!"

Joan shrank back as if a blow had been dealt her.

"Ah, my lass, I mean to stand by—do not fear that!" for Margot saw the fear rising to Joan's eyes, "but we must understand each other from the first. All my life, my dear, the love of little children has been the passion in my heart. I had the dream of young girls—I expected to have a home and my own wee ones"—in high emotions Margot slipped into the old mother tongue which for the most part was all but lost—"and then it broke upon me that men saw no favor in me. No man ever asked me to marry him, not one, Joan. When I felt my lack I fear I showed too plainly my longing. Men, and women, too, misunderstood. Man-mad they called me, when all along it was the mother in me crying aloud for what never was to be. I've seen the time when I've envied the women crying over their dead children; the bitterest tears of my days were shed over the babies that never were! It hardened me—the cruelty and injustice of it, the putting into my heart and soul the yearning, and then holding the joy beyond my poor reach. I think I understand and pity the women who take a by-path to their happiness, but I cannot forgive them as neglect or mistreat the bairns once they come.

"My lady, I think, felt for me—she left you with

me with great faith, and with you I found a sort of peace. I felt as if your dead mother had a mighty hold upon me. I liked to think she—used me. Since coming here I've taken the poor, neglected, forsaken ones and done my best for them. There was one, two summers ago, as did not want to leave me—he clung to me, to the woods and hills. I tried to get his people to give him to me—but they would not. They wanted to put him to the wheel and use his young body—for the making of money. But the Lord took a hand there. The lad was that tender of animals that he'd risk his life any day for their saving. There was a big storm. Binney, the lad, went to help bring back some lambs as had strayed. Up on the hill back of the home meadow a tree was struck. Well, Binney did not have to go back! I'm telling you all this, Joan, to let you see, lass, my feeling toward the children. I cannot help you, I cannot put my heart into helping you, unless you bear clear in mind your little child."

Never before had Joan been so deeply moved; never had life so gripped her. She and Margot were no longer nurse and one-time nursling. They were two women face to face with a grim situation. After a moment Margot spoke on, her plain middle-aged face pale and sad. She had confessed, had opened her soul.

"If you do your duty clean and upright, my lass, keeping in mind this little child who had no choice in the matter, God in heaven will stand by you, and the love for your baby will come natural and sweet, and a way will be opened. I cannot harm my lady by setting her aside. That would be wrong and unholy. Joan, lass,

stand up to this sensibly and right and I'll keep close to you, close."

The tears were falling down Joan's cheeks, her head was bent, and she swayed back and forth in her low chair. Margot waited. She had had her say. Her hands were folded patiently on her lap.

"But—not just yet, Margot; not just yet," Joan sobbed.

"There's time, lass."

"Something may happen——"

"I think only the right will happen. You are young and strong, I can lend a hand along the way—all will be right."

"Oh! Margot, you have made it seem so—so—tremendously inevitable."

"Had you thought it less, lass?" Then: "'Tis a lonely place—the farm. Biding through the waiting with a lone woman who must often leave you to yourself when calls for help come will be no easy thing; but if you choose to stay, my house and care and love are open to you, and together we may make the way easier for the little child as has all the right in God's world to demand it. What do you choose to do, my lass?"

"Stay with you, Margot, to the end."

It was then that Margot got up and put her strong arms about Joan. She lifted her to her feet, half carried her toward the stairs. "Poor tired lamb," she said, "come and be tucked in bed. We'll not talk overmuch of this matter, all's said that need be said for a time. The spring is coming and there's the wonder of that, and the animals will learn to watch for you—that's a mighty thing to lonely people, the watching and trust-

ing of animals. There, lass"—for Joan's crying was falling into broken sobs—"there are brighter times ahead—and we have each other. You are my own good little maid again, ever brave and honest when it came to the test."

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS strange to find life settling into routine again. Margot's days, except for Joan's presence, went on quietly enough, and after a time Joan's sense of loyalty, her pride and gratitude, helped her to evolve a course that would not greatly interfere with Margot and might add, perhaps, a bit of happiness to the lonely woman's days.

Joan had at first a fear of being left alone, especially at night when Margot was called elsewhere to help the sick or aid in some other way a needy neighbor; but this she overcame. Except for such service Margot seemed to have no contact with others. This puzzled Joan. She thought of the long winters—what did Margot do with no social pastimes? To this Margot replied with a smile:

"I'm content enough. There's plenty to do, and sleep comes at the day's end. There's reading, too, of a sort. I keep up as best I can with my nursing; there's ever new ways cropping up. The doctor down at The Center says I'm equal to him—that's his way of flattering me so that I'll take the cases he does not want; but I like the doing of it all and it brings folks closer. I let him think I take in all he says."

"You go to church, Margot?"

But Margot shook her head. "I suppose it's my dullness, Joan, but I cannot find the real God in the church,

and the man-made God is not to my liking. I'm a bit testy when it comes to God. Unless He's better than them as makes Him, I do not want Him."

There was much work to do, certainly, and after a while Joan assumed one task after another. Margot's quick smile was her reward. There was a good horse that Joan, for a time, rode. Then she learned to drive Margot about in a little Ford car. Occasionally she and Margot talked of the future, and Patricia's letters were a great joy. But for all she did and tried to do Joan knew homesickness of the direst kind. It was like craving a thing that had been swept beyond her reach.

The spring was late in coming and winter retreated grudgingly. When the snow was at last gone, in heavy boots Joan climbed the hills and one day she saw a blasted tree near an open space, and remembered the boy Binney. After that, often when she was alone, she fancied she heard a call, and she hid her eyes and covered her ears.

Another day in early May she grew desperate. She wrote to Nancy Holt. Letters from Nancy with home news would be better than the ominous silence. But the letter was returned. "Could not be delivered" was printed on the envelope. Nancy had gone away, leaving no address.

"How exactly like Nancy to drop out of sight at a crucial moment and leave no trace behind her," thought Joan, forgetting that she had done exactly that herself.

Nancy had resented Joan's behavior but was too proud to act the part of a sleuth. Corlyss Martin had called, all agog, soon after Joan's departure, to share her news with Nancy and hopefully present her deduc-

tions. Nancy had listened unwillingly, and had been sorely perplexed.

"Now what do you make of it?" Corlyss asked.

"Make of what?" Nancy asked coolly, though she was keen with curiosity.

"Joan. Don't be slow on the uptake, Nan. I bet Joan's heading for South America. I heard the other day that Norman Grey is mad about some dancing woman down there. One of the leggy kind, you know. Joan may land in a mare's nest—or is it a hornet's nest? Mares don't have nests, do they?"

"Lord, Corlyss"—Nancy was laughing in spite of herself—"the things you know and don't know! Anyone would think you were connected with a wireless station."

"I am. I'm intuitive," Corlyss explained. "I seem to *know* things by instinct. I watched Joan closely while she talked—you know how she can talk and say nothing! South America was written large all over her."

Nancy tried to change the subject, but Corlyss rambled on. "Later," Nancy was thinking, "I will call on the Greys and see what I can learn there. The Greys do not approve of me but they like me." This always made Nancy smile. So many people felt that way about her. Suddenly something Corlyss was saying brought Nancy back to the present and her nerve-racking caller.

Corlyss had finished with Joan and was focusing on her own affairs.

"When a woman realizes that she no longer loves a man you wouldn't think it right for her to go on living with him, would you, Nan?" Corlyss was fishing in new waters. Nancy sensed the situation.

"Yes—" she replied glibly, "that is, if the man can stand *her!*"

"And—and have children?" Nan's ready retort had staggered Corlyss. "It would mean that, and in a five-room flat," she broke in.

"You're talking about yourself and Bob? I'd be sorry for Bob and the children."

"Nan, you *are* cold-blooded." Corlyss, blank-eyed and flushed, turned away. It was going to be rather horrid, she feared, after the divorce—for Corlyss quite definitely had decided upon a divorce—to regain her intimate friends.

"You make me feel ill, Corlyss." Nancy got up and walked about the roof. She had genuine sympathy for Martin who, lately, had taken on a bewildered and helpless look. The Trents, too, were decent people; it was sad that they should have to support their daughter's deplorable tendencies. Where would Corlyss land them all?

Corlyss had barely left the house when Martin appeared. Nancy asked him if he had met Corlyss.

"No. I haven't seen her for a week," he said, sinking limply in a chair. Then he broke the bounds of loyalty to Corlyss and made his appeal.

"You see," he explained, his young face troubled and haggard, "I only want—what seems to be reasonable and right, but there's no budging Corlyss."

"Of course not!" Nancy agreed sympathetically. "Don't try, Bob." Then, after a moment's reflection, "You might beat her off her perch. There's something to say for the good old cave methods where such women as Corlyss are concerned."

But Martin was past the smiling stage. "My position in the Trent family," he went on desperately, "is impossible. The food chokes me, their attitude toward me is humiliating to the last degree. Half the time they —don't see me, even."

"They wouldn't," Nancy comforted; "they all have a blind spot on their eyes."

"When we were up at your lodge, Nan," Martin stumbled on, "I thought I—I discovered the real Corlyss. Before that the old rot we all talked seemed to go —'the world is ours' and all the rest of it—but when she took the stand she did about marrying me, honest, Nan, something fine and good seemed to suddenly break loose in me. I wanted to—to be different with her and try to—make good, you know."

"Don't!" Nancy turned her face away. "Don't, Bob, you make me feel like crying. That was a damned party —or at least I didn't get the right lot together. It has driven us all apart like a charge of dynamite, and in the beginning I meant—good Lord! I meant to lay ghosts, not create a new lot. Bob, I hope you'll get free of Corlyss for your own sake. You're too good for her—she isn't wholesome."

"And I was beginning to love her, Nan."

"No, you were not, Bob. You were beginning to get used to her, settling under your load; men like you are made that way and they get sentimental or they couldn't plod on. You just stand pat and make it as hard as possible for the Trents. It may save them another divorce later on."

Dejectedly, Martin departed with an obscure corner of his heart somehow lighted.

Nancy, sitting alone, began to count her trials. Ted Roland, too, was getting on her frayed nerves. She wanted him now, but pride forbade her calling him up. Had Roland approached her on bended knees she would soon have disposed of him, but his attitude was erect and at times indifferent—he was probably cooling off. He wasn't around when he was most wanted, he was attending strictly to business and giving his mother a bit more attention. When he *did* emerge and blend into Nancy's life he was cheerful—far *too* cheerful for a discarded lover. And he appeared to respect Nancy's right to turn him down. But worse even than this, Roland made it more and more evident that in accepting Nancy as a friend he felt free to betray his real opinion of her, as a friend should. For a man whose love had been refused to regard the woman who had refused him as a high-minded and clear-souled creature was almost beyond belief. But this appeared to be Roland's sincere conviction. He again and again directly and indirectly held the girl he had created out of wild figments of his brain before the astonished Nancy who had refused his love. If Corlyss deemed Nancy lacking in morals, Roland apparently believed that she was morality itself, with strange limitations of ignorance and almost childish bravado. He would not see her as she was and this drove Nancy perilously near to the rocks.

"You need a friend, Nancy," he reiterated, "a man, at that. I'm not particularly charmed with the idea that I'm the sort that can never win your love, but I thank heaven that you can accept me as a friend."

Nancy flared at this and, if the truth were confessed,

trembled at it. "I'm nearly thirty," she reminded Roland, "and I've been on my own all my life. I bullied my nurses, and you know how Grandfather let me have my head. I do not think you need sit up nights in order to protect my stainless character. Really, Ted, you make me utterly wretched by your misrepresentation of me. Not that it hurts me in the long run, but some day you may get a revealing shock——"

Roland at this smiled his big, honest, heart-reviving smile and asked Nancy out to dinner. He was always asking her out to dinner and then taking her home early. It was baffling and challenging. Nancy contemplated following Joan's example and stealing away to Europe and to one of her wild, dangerous escapades, the nature of which no one would believe and so had of necessity always to be kept secret.

"What would Roland think if he knew?" Nancy's lips curled mischievously, but her eyes were unsmiling. "What would Corlyss think?" There was no doubt as to what Corlyss would think. Still, the lure grew stronger. It had been nearly two years since she had gone across to Italy on her secret mission.

And then just three days before Joan's letter reached New York Nancy had a rude awakening that instead of sending her to her beloved Italy drove her with her servants to the Adirondack camp where certainly, at that time of year, no one could suspect her of being.

She was sitting by the library fire one bitter night when she heard the door bell ring. She sat quite still, her back to the hall. She was so small that, curled up as she was in the deep chair, she was hidden from view. The drawing room across the hall was dimly lighted.

The maid admitted someone, asked him to wait in the drawing room, and then said:

"What name, please?"

"John Welling."

Nancy felt as if her very life was ebbing from her as she heard that name. For a moment she could not move. In her dim place she tried to think clearly but could not. The warm, bright hall divided her from the one man in the world who had power to stir her to the depth of her nature—the unsuspected depths—the one above all others who had no right to stir her. And still she waited. The maid came down the stairs. Having failed to find her mistress above, she concluded that she was out, but Nancy, stealthily going from the library through a small office room in the rear, intercepted the girl at the foot of the stairs. The maid started nervously.

"I thought you were out, Miss Nancy," she said. "There's a gentleman—a Mr. Welling, in the drawing room."

"Thank you, Charlotte. I will see him, and I'll ring when I need you." And then, assuming a nonchalant air, Nancy walked to the large lighted room.

Welling rose to meet her. He was big; he wore a heavy fur coat that emphasized his bulk; his hat he had left on the hall table.

"Nancy!" he whispered, and held out his arms.

Nancy ran to him and was engulfed. Welling bent over her, his lips on her hair. "You—promised you would never do this," Nancy murmured the words.

"I know, Nan, but I had to. Let me explain. Where can we go to be alone—for an hour?" Welling took off his coat; he meant to be comfortable.

"Across the hall. There's a fire in the library, it's warmer there and—smaller." They walked across the hall. Nancy turned on a golden-tinted light in the small room and they sat by the hearth, Welling in the big chair that Nancy had just vacated, and she on an ottoman by his side.

"How wonderful you are, my dear, my dear!" Welling touched Nancy's short curls, ruffled them with his cold fingers, and smiled down upon her. "Just a bit more wonderful than ever, after over a year!"

Nancy looked up into the strong, grave face, into the smiling eyes that held shadows, grim shadows, in their depths. At the temples the crisp hair showed a silver rim—the face was the face of a man who had weathered many a gale, but who had never yet failed to reach the haven where he, for the time being, desired to be.

The red coals on the hearth fell apart, lay like live, panting things in the ashes of earlier fires—they seemed gasping for breath. The heat was intense.

"Come up here, darling, the chair is large enough for us both."

"No, John." Nancy had been taken at an unguarded moment, taken when she had almost decided to telegraph to John Welling that she was going to Italy! And Welling's appearance in her home, where they had both agreed that he must never come, had shattered her armor. However, she was gathering the bits about her now.

Welling smiled down upon the bent head. He was used to Nancy's whims. "Angry because I am here, dear?" he asked.

"Not angry, exactly, but surprised."

"You love surprises, Nan."

"Not this kind!"

Again Welling smiled. "You know we agreed, dear, that pay day was bound to come eventually. A diet of dreams that no one but ourselves could believe in was bound to end disastrously—or——"

"Please don't!" Nancy implored.

Welling bent and drew Nancy closer until her body pressed against his knees. "Those were golden days, my darling," he said, "great tests of endurance for our love and passion, but we both knew there must be a day of reckoning. We felt the same about that. Mystery under Italian skies, magic on Swiss mountains, ecstasy in proving our mettle in the walled German towns—oh! it was all a great experience. I do not begrudge it, my dearest, but we never forgot, you and I, that we were hard-headed Americans and honest at the core. We've played fair, Nan, and although no one would believe us—we know the stern stuff of dreams as well as the glitter, but we knew they *were* dreams. I've waked up, Nan. The bubble has burst. I simply cannot do without you—I'm going across again, a sudden business call. You must come with me. Thank God! through it all —the longing, the suppression, the wizard charm of you—I knew there lay the woman of you, the honest soul of you that could deal, when the time came, with the one big fact and let the rest go. Nan, will you come?"

Nancy did not move. The silence in the dim room was oppressive. The glowing coals ceased panting—they were growing pale, mere embers.

"Nan!"

"Yes, John."

"You *will* come?"

"No."

"You mean, you delicious child, you will not sail with me. I could arrange that. You mean—oh! I see, you will join me later over there? Keep up the pretty farce a little longer. Trying to believe in Santa Claus a little longer?"

And then Nancy got up and sat on the arm of Welling's chair. Having come to a decision she was no longer afraid of him, nor of herself. She pressed her face against his—he was the only man she had ever loved, would ever love, but that even could not frighten her any longer.

"John, I mean that I cannot live with you. I think I knew it when we said good-bye that last time in Naples. I knew then as you did—though neither of us acknowledged it—that it *was* good-bye to—to dreams."

"My darling, we can make reality more wonderful than any mad dreams we evolved. We can rely upon each other; we know the clay of which we are made. Good, red clay that endured the mauling we gave it while we played."

"I know, John, but—I cannot go on. When it comes to the test I cannot accept what you have to offer."

Welling's face clouded. "Nan," he said quietly, almost severely, "I thought we had said all that there was to be said upon that topic. I believed you were fine enough, big enough to understand—you assured me that you were."

"I know, John. I thought I was. At a—a distance I

trusted myself. At close range I simply cannot accept."

"What has changed you?"

"Merely the—the distance, John. I know how I must appear to you, but I cannot!"

"And you've led me on—to this end?" Welling drew himself away. "Just what do you mean, Nancy?" He got up and stood in front of the girl.

"John, I'm quite a different woman from what I thought I was, that's all. I'm disappointed and disgusted with myself. But the fact remains; now that I've come to the stile I cannot jump over!"

Welling dropped into the chair again, leaned back, drew Nancy closer and—laughed. "You little darling," he murmured, "I see. You want me to—help you over. All right, I've arranged everything. Do you remember that little villa on Lake Constance? I mean to buy that. I think you and I are the only ones in the world who can find the trail to it. We can create a life—find it always awaiting us."

But Nancy stopped him. Her eyes were filled with tears. "Ah! can you not see how you are making me suffer?" she cried. "Can you not see how I *want* to, how the intellectual part of me urges me to accept while all the time I—cannot?"

Welling scowled. "Don't drive me too far, Nan," he continued. "I do not want to think you have deceived me, led me up a blind alley——"

"I'm afraid we've both been running up a blind alley, John."

"Not I."

Then Nancy went on hurriedly, giving herself no time for watching the effect of her words on Welling: "Last

autumn I went up to the woods, John. You remember I told you about the lodge where, as a child, I was taken to be with my parents? My mother one summer, my father the next summer? They were divorced, you know. Something happened there——"

"You met someone else?" Welling asked brutally. He was reducing the situation to ugly reality.

"I met myself, John."

"I wish you would confine yourself to plain common sense, Nan."

"All right. Well, I suddenly discovered that for all my big talk about having my own life and interpreting it according to my own ideals I wanted the same old, silly, blessed things that I believe all women want."

"Namely——" Welling sounded distant and hard.

"Oh, the man I love!"

"You doubt me, Nan?" Softer now.

"No, but the way I wanted him. I wanted just the common everyday kind of things, once I stepped out of dreams. Home, children—you know." Nancy's tone was pitifully weak and faltering.

Welling grew rigid. "It's rather late in the day, isn't it," he asked coldly, "to go into that? You said you couldn't care for me, love me, if I were brute enough to cast my wife and children aside. I believed you. You know my wife and I have nothing in common but the children. We agreed, you and I, that to smash the future for them would be dastardly, cheap, and futile."

"Yes, and I meant it, John." Nancy quivered. "I never could have loved you, trusted you, had you been capable of that. Yes, I understood, or thought I did."

"Then what in heaven's name are you driving at,

Nan? I don't like to suspect you of posing, but after our *appearances* of evil, certainly you cannot expect me to take this attitude of yours seriously." This was harsh, but the justice of it stung Nancy.

"I know how it must seem to you, John. I know that no one could ever believe that our being together over there was—was innocent, in a way; it wasn't really. You and I knew, and it did not matter then. That aspect of it does not matter now, but when it comes to changing our relationship—I cannot, I simply cannot!"

"What's changed your thought about this, Nan?" Welling found himself interested. After all, Nancy was capable of leading him on—dramatically, but this was carrying the game too far. If she really were playing—— For a moment Welling considered taking things in his own hands, overpowering her, claiming her. But a second glance at the girl near him decided against this course.

As if Nancy suspected Welling's mind, she broke forth rather unguardedly: "You see, John, when it comes to—the doing of it, I cannot eat at second table, go around to—to back doors when no one is looking. I cannot be satisfied with what another woman no longer wants, or can have!"

"Nancy, I forbid you talking in such a way. It is brutal, low." Welling got up again, this time striding angrily across the room. Coming back he kicked a log on the hearth until it broke into flying sparks, then he bent and threw on another log. Action was necessary. At that moment baffled, balked, he felt that he hated the woman in the chair. "You must be mad!" he flung out at her, and rose facing her.

"I wonder if I am?" Nancy spoke wearily. "It does seem like it." Tenderness crept into the quiet words.

"Rot!" muttered Welling, and took another turn. Then: "I suppose, boiled down, I am to understand one of three things. You have found someone else, or you are trying, after all we've gone over, to force me to your demand, or you are too cowardly to play the game, once you're put to the test. If you have met someone else, let's end this. If you think I could cause untold suffering to—to my children, why, Nan, all I've got to say is this: think me what you must, but I love them too well. They love me too well for me to consider that for a moment. They would go utterly out of my life, and I couldn't bear that. All else—is yours absolutely. I am a lonely man, a hungry man. I love you sincerely and I know myself well enough to know that I can make you happy. Now, then, what is it? You are not a coward, Nan!"

Nancy paused. She was trying in the chaos of the moment to find adequate words while all the time she was growing more and more conscious that there are moments when a man and a woman speak different tongues, that there is no way to gain clear understanding. Helplessly she said at last, "I suppose I *am* a coward, John, but I love you, I love you. Just because I love you more than I realized, I cannot—well, be one of the women who dares to take what alone is yours to offer."

Welling stifled something like a curse, then asked: "You expect me to believe this?"

"No. That's the terrible part of it. I do not expect you to believe it."

"What are you trying to tell me, Nan?" Welling was at his patience's end. "You mean you are willing after all our joy to starve us both because life has muddled things and we have to take what we decently can? You've taken your interpretation of joy and—now?"

"It doesn't seem decent," Nancy faltered, "that's the trouble. When I get close to it it doesn't look decent—not even sporting! It's just because I love you in the—" Nancy paused helplessly, then mumbled in the language she knew could not be understood—"in the old, old-fashioned way that I cannot take the—the new kind. It's humiliating, but that's the kind I am."

Welling was brought at last to a dead wall. He could not batter it down and there did not seem any way of getting around it. "There's nothing more to say, apparently," he muttered angrily.

"I suppose not, John, except this: I *do* love you. If I loved you less——"

The reiteration angered Welling. "Spare yourself and me, Nancy. We're not driveling idiots. Listen to me. I sail on the *Mauretania,* to-morrow at noon. I took the hopeful precaution of reserving a suite—I shall not change my plans." Not a glance backward—nothing!

Nancy listened to the outer door close. She stretched out her arms, almost she called after him. Then, like a flash came the thought: "To-morrow at noon!" It acted like a drug. In her soul Nancy knew that she *was* drugged, but at least she could rest and sleep. There were long hours before the *Mauretania* sailed.

CHAPTER VII

WHILE John Welling was straining his eyes watching the receding skyline of Manhattan from the deck of the *Mauretania,* Nancy, hollow-eyed and pale, was gathering her forces together desperately.

"I'll get away and take everything with me," she nervously concluded. "Then what?" So dexterously did Nancy plan and succeed that in three days the old house was closed. The amazed servants responded to her invitation to take a vacation in the deep woods, and rather rakishly followed on.

And that was why Joan's letter was returned; why to Roland's many telephone calls and futile door-bell attacks nothing happened. Corlyss had her surmises, tainted ones of course. She had always been suspicious of Nancy's absences abroad. But Martin was giving Corlyss something else to think about just then and so she gave less heed to Nancy's departure.

Nancy had inspired Martin to action and he simply refused to give his wife a "cause." He was behaving himself in a surprisingly frank and open manner. It was going to be a difficult struggle. Martin refused to take a Western trip at any price; he insisted that he was more than willing to support his wife, indeed he was anxious to do so, and in proof of this rented a small but respectable apartment and set up bachelor quarters.

Corlyss was desperate and her people were nonplussed. They actually took heed of Martin as an individual and stood in awe of him.

And up in Maine Joan, accepting her position with what grace she could, faced the inevitable and kept close to Margot. She was soul-lonely but oddly enough, once she relaxed the sense of isolation, fear, and desperation lessened. The reaction surprised Joan herself and caused poor, troubled Margot to wonder if the time had not come to cable to Patricia Henley. The right to do this at the proper time she had insisted upon.

"I suppose," Joan thought in the solitude of the eastern chamber, "a condemned person must feel as I do. No more struggle, no use for heroics. I must see the thing through in the best way I can."

And then into the calm entered the first real thought of the child as an identity, a part of all the future, whatever the future might be. The child became *her* child. "It will only harm everything if I fail now," she concluded, and at once set her plans definitely in order. Barring the chance that she, the child, or both of them should die, what could be done for the child's best good? It resolved itself slowly but clearly into this:

"I will go abroad and stay as long as I think safe. Grandy will approve of that. I mean to live and have happiness."

Joan did not, even unconsciously, specify the kind or degree of happiness. She simply insisted that she must have a life, normal, and holding its share of happiness, she and her child! Now that she meant to do all in her power to make the future safe, she asked only that she have her share in that safety, she and her

child! The reiteration became a chant. What other course was possible? Managed properly, there was no reason for—— But there Joan halted. For what? Fear of life, that was it. Fear of life.

Joan and Margot drew closer together. They talked quite frankly. Margot approved of Joan's plan. "Would you come with us, Margot?" Joan once asked.

"That must be as my lady says, lass."

"I think I can count upon Grandy, Margot. But would you be willing to leave your home?"

Margot's eyes clouded and instinctively she glanced out of the window to her hills, already softening in color and outline as the warm sap ran up. "I could do even that for my lady, lass."

"And for me?"

"You've grown close to me, Joan. I would be glad to serve you."

It was such talks as this that made Joan realize the existence of that bridge which oftener separates than unites. Across some things neither she nor Margot could go heedlessly. It must be step by step, and the daily testing to estimate the strength of the narrow way.

It had been an ordeal for Margot as well as Joan. The scattered neighbors knew of Joan's presence in the little red house, but they accepted her as one of Margot's "cases" and were not overcurious. They were busy, honest souls and regarded Margot with reverential respect which her lack of ordinary sociability enhanced rather than lessened. But more and more Joan shrank from observation and finally many took it for granted that she was no longer with Margot.

"We'd best be taking the doctor into our confidence,"

Margot suggested. "I'll tell him right enough that your people wanted you to have rest, quiet, and my care. That's enough for him—he's not an asking man. He escapes much by taking things and people for granted."

"Not just yet, Margot," Joan pleaded. And Margot, watching anxiously, waited.

During those quiet days Joan did more and more careful thinking. Having accepted what she considered her only wise course, she characteristically went into detail. Living abroad would be pleasant enough, she and Patricia knew of many enchanting spots—several in Scotland. Perhaps Margot, if she consented to go with them, would like that best. Joan had, unconsciously, abdicated any personal claims on the future. She first of all focused upon her child, then upon Patricia, whose part in it all often caused Joan deep heartache. Patricia's hopes, her pride, her splendid courage—all these attributes were to be sorely tested, and the certainty of Patricia's loyalty and support caused Joan the cruelest hurt of all. She recalled Corlyss's family, and a sense of humiliation swept over her.

If Patricia could turn against her, upbraid her, it would be easier; but Joan knew exactly how Patricia would react. She would stand by, just as the Trents, in their way, had stood by Corlyss. With uplifted head Patricia would go on as she had gone from the beginning of her struggle with life. No one had ever seen Patricia Henley dodge a blow or flinch when the blow fell.

"Her lips will tighten a bit," Joan reflected, "then she'll rush into action."

It was in regard to that action that Joan thought

most. After all, she was going to deal with her own life and construct something out of it. She was not Patricia's granddaughter for nothing. All the years of training and contact had not been thrown away and she still clung to her code—some of it, at least. Just how to assert herself and hold her own at a moment when by all the laws of justice Patricia could make demands, occupied much of Joan's thought.

There were hours, too, when Joan saw gleams of comfort and joy far, far in the future. A different life, a lonely life in many ways, but if it were honestly lived and directed unselfishly there would be compensations. There must be!

Margot's part in all this was, to Joan, not yet to be counted upon. Margot would act according to Patricia Henley's dictates. Oddly enough, this aspect of the matter puzzled Joan—irritated her too, at times. Margot, so efficient, independent, and courageous in most things, had a strange complex where Patricia Henley was concerned. It baffled Joan.

"It must be the old strain of caste," she thought, "and an abnormal sense of gratitude." There was something in this, but there was more. Under Margot's plain, practical exterior, there existed an almost fanatical loyalty and tenderness, colored by a vivid imagination. Deprived of a normal, natural form of expression, Margot had developed where and as she could. To her, Patricia Henley represented a power of divine quality. Patricia was just, generous, merciful. She had had a hard life devoted largely to making the lives of others less hard. She had only one passion, as far as Margot

could discern, and that was for Joan. And Joan was about to deal a deadly blow to all that Margot knew existed. She knew it as a woman, an older woman, knew it. She knew it as a servant knew it who had shared silently and appreciatively a good mistress's confidences.

Margot had stood by Joan through everything, so far, for Patricia Henley's sake. But Joan grew to understand that it *was* for Patricia's sake and, as far as in her lay, Margot was doing her best, at the moment, to act as Patricia would have her act.

"When my lady comes," the words were often on Margot's lips. And so Joan did little planning that included Margot. Margot was a directed force, not an independent one.

Margot put off taking the village doctor into her confidence for a while. "When my lady comes!" Again this influenced her. There was yet time; she meant to cable, though, to Mrs. Henley at once. The cable was carefully worded and the slip of paper with the four words were hidden among Margot's papers ready now to go forth. Joan was strong and well. In an emergency Margot knew that she could care for Joan—the doctor had turned many a case over to her, had indeed instructed and trained her. He was often called miles away from The Center and was gone days at a time—the logging camps were dangerous places at some seasons and he was the only doctor near enough to depend upon.

"Women are safer with you than with me," he often remarked to Margot. "I have great confidence in you."

"The man's way of slipping from under an unliked

load," Margot reflected, but she knew that, to a certain extent, he was right. Her sympathy and compassion emphasized her skill. "I'm not worrying on that score," Margot said to herself, thinking of Joan.

What she was worrying about silently, intently, was Patricia Henley's reaction to the shock that she was bound to suffer, no matter how she sought to soften it. Margot went oftener to her open spaces now with her wordless prayers. "If my lady were only here," she thought, "all else would be clear."

Without Joan's knowledge, Margot sent the cable. But Patricia did not receive it for the simple reason that when it reached the hotel Patricia Henley was on the ocean, homeward bound. She had had one of her strange experiences about which she rarely spoke. Her practical common sense challenged such experiences, but often, rather shamefacedly, she heeded their warning. These experiences usually came while she slept and in the form of dreams. Occasionally, while sitting or watching alone, they overcame her.

"Dreams and whimwhams," Patricia termed them, but all her life they had held a certain power over her.

"My lady, you sense things," Margot had often told her; "to my thinking the sense is a bit of the God left in us that we'd best be grateful for, and cherish."

So it was that one day, walking in the hills above Naples, Patricia "felt" Joan with her. She reasoned it out calmly enough, there had been a letter from Joan the day before. Rather a comforting letter, in a way. But between the lines there was—something. Just what? Patricia's thoughts began to detach themselves from calm reasoning and run riot. They darted about

like will-o'-the-wisps. She rather breathlessly sought to pursue them, catch them, and force them into orderly array. They, for the most part, eluded her and those she managed to catch were of the least importance. But were they?

The memory of Nancy Holt's mountain party! Why should that suddenly occur to her? She could account for that. Nancy had written asking for Joan's address. The letter had come in the mail with Joan's last letter. Naturally, as she read it, she recalled the Adirondack "orgy"; that was what Patricia termed it. "Use your common sense and such whimwhams can easily be reduced to normal." Patricia tried to smile. The scent of lovely flowers lured her; the skies were sunny and blue as Italian skies should be. Patricia was feeling well, too. Then she mastered another vagrant thought!

That camp episode was in early October. This was May. Patricia stood quite still and succumbed to that power which Margot had termed as "a bit of the God left in us." Then Patricia seemed to *know*. At first it was a vague knowledge, a thing creeping out of the dark, not clearly revealed, but suddenly it stood forth and Patricia felt that she had known it from the first!

"I'm glad Joan is with Margot!" The relief of this thought was overwhelming. It gave Patricia courage to turn back to the hotel and make hasty but wise preparations for returning to America at once. She decided not to cable—after all it would be natural enough for her to change her plans. Natural, too, upon reaching America, to go at once to Maine.

"If all this is flimflam," thought Patricia, "we'll have

a jolly surprise party. If not——" Well, along that line she dared not think. She knew the truth!

She took a fast steamer; she was a good sailor and on the voyage she devoted herself to keeping in perfect condition.

CHAPTER VIII

PATRICIA HENLEY stopped in New York only long enough to look over her house and telephone to her maids, asking them to be on duty in a fortnight and to get everything in order for her return and Joan's. Then she turned her face toward Maine, rather low-spiritedly.

Among familiar scenes she lost the support of imagination and new fears took the place of others. If Joan ever suspected what had brought her headlong to America the beautiful confidence existing between them would be gone forever! Patricia seemed to see Joan's startled, indignant, and proud eyes confronting her. She positively flinched.

On the other hand, if she played a new rôle, the rôle of the doting, anxious, and yearning grandmother, Joan would be mystified and wonder what ailed her. Old age, on-coming dependence? Poor Patricia at that stage positively craved the privileges of age and dependence—she longed to slump; it would be so much easier than to control a situation that might not exist. This thought humiliated her and stiffened her morale. She must make no false move.

Almost she decided to return to her home, write sanely to Joan, and leave the next steps to develop. Either things were as she feared or they were not—

being off the scene might be best. But Patricia did not turn back. She went determinedly on.

When she reached The Center she confronted difficulties. There was no conveyance at the station. There had been a bad accident at the logging camps—the men, boys, and able-bodied women all seemed to have gone up there. Patricia went to the little hotel and got breakfast and after much searching discovered a man who would take her up to the farm—for a consideration, indeed, several of them.

The roads were bad. "Breaking up." An extra dollar over the original price covered this. The accident at the camp, too. What would folks think of him if he were needed there and was unable to get back in time? Going off making money when he might be called?

Patricia did not haggle. She was growing nervous and impatient—a sense of hurry evolved, too. That disturbed her greatly. Why should she feel hurried when she was, after all, so near her destination? Only five miles. The day was fine; five miles were nothing to Patricia.

"See here," she said at last, "you put my bags in the car and come as soon as you can. I'll walk on."

"Same price, ma'am? I couldn't, considering all things, take less."

"Certainly, the same price." With this Patricia took to the road and walked briskly on. After the confinement of the train, a restless night, and with the sense of hurry urging her on, exercise was delightful. The air, too, was bracing and keen. Spring, without languor, was a new and fine experience. Faster and faster Patricia hurried along.

Margot, at this same time, was busy outside her home. She was anxious. Of course there was no need of anxiety—there was plenty of time. But Joan was not well, indeed she had not got up that morning. She had pleaded laziness and Margot had gone about her tasks noiselessly, hoping that Joan would sleep off the mood, whatever it was, and be up by noon.

Then troubling things developed. The telephone was out of order. That link between the world and "Off the Road" was the one thing above all others that kept Margot calm and assured. Then she discovered that there were two flat tires on her Ford. "They were proper enough yesterday," Margot reflected. "Lord! how things *do* conspire."

Earlier in the day a passing farmer had told her about the camp accident.

"The doctor's gone and most of the men as can, and some of the women," the man had explained. Then: "Doc said as how you was to stand by right here to home in case anything turned up round The Center."

This all troubled Margot—yet in a way comforted her. She did not want to leave Joan just now. She might have been called to the camp. Margot, fretting about the telephone, the absence of the doctor, and Joan's strange mood, turned to the repairing of the tires on her car. It was a difficult task. Margot was not deft at such work and there were many interruptions. Twice she had gone to the house and, tiptoeing upstairs, had looked in at Joan.

"She's sleeping; that's good!" Margot stole away and on her way to the garage stopped to attend to several house duties.

All these delays gave Patricia time to cover the five miles, walking faster and faster, her breath coming quicker and that uncanny sense of hurry lashing her on. She had taken short cuts, too, realizing that for some reason or another the driver of the car would not overtake her unless she waited on the road for him. She reached the farm tired, muddy as to boots, and indignant. No matter what pose she adopted she could not, now, make a dignified entrance.

The little red house looked friendly enough. Windows were raised and the front door was ajar. Margot had meant to close that on her last visit to the house, but had forgotten to. Patricia paused on the stone step to catch her breath and scrape some mud from her boots; bending to this last necessity, a wild cry startled her.

"Margot! Margot!"

Patricia stood up. She was rigid and frightened. Then fear fled, the reeling senses instantly reacted. She pushed the door open and was on the first step of the narrow stairs when again that wild, unnatural cry broke through the stillness. This time it was: "Grandy! Oh, Grandy!"

"Yes, my dear. Yes, Joan. I am here!" Patricia was at the door of the east chamber with these words on her lips. "Just in time, darling. Now—trust me. There is nothing to frighten you. Everything is quite all right. Be a brave girl. Everything is all right!"

Quite right! Why, Patricia's world was whirling madly, chaotically; but her brain was at its post, trying to guide something, everything into safety.

"Lie down, Joan," for Joan was sitting up in bed.

"There, my dear. Quiet." Patricia had tossed her coat and hat aside. "I will bring Margot. Trust me, Joan." How idiotic the words sounded, but they were having an effect.

Margot came, white-lipped but competent. Patricia recognized her competency at once and stood aside. The long hours dragged on. Everything—words, actions, thoughts were staccato.

"Yes, my lady. I can manage. The doctor is miles off; an accident. The telephone is out of order. As soon as I can leave I'll fetch help. Yes—my lady, it's too soon, but everything's going right. I did—send for you. Cabled."

In spite of herself Patricia gradually relied upon Margot's skill. She felt that all that could be done was being done, and done well. They were marooned—the three of them. There was need indeed for calm nerves and clear heads. Strange thoughts crowded in. Joan must not die! But the child? Patricia drew her breath in sharply. "Oh! if the child *would* only die!" If not, then it must be hidden! There could always be a way—if only people did not lose their heads. To this end Patricia achieved greater calm.

It was evening, a purple, starry evening, when Joan's child was born.

"Dead?" asked Patricia in a tone too low for Joan to hear.

Margot nodded. "I think so—my lady. Yes."

"Take it away." Margot disappeared.

How peaceful Joan was at last—how like her little, tired girl. Patricia sat by the bed, the night light shaded, and watched the pretty, relaxed face on the pillow. Now

was time for thought and plotting. Joan would live. Patricia was confident as to that. The child was dead! Very well. Joan had done her best to ruin her own life —but let that go! Patricia knew the anger of relief.

"I am going to save her in spite of her own folly," she thought on. "It's my turn now," and she was wholly the woman of affairs, the woman who had always refused to let difficulties overcome her. "Joan will see now that I was right! She will not oppose me . . ." Already the way on ahead looked brighter to Patricia.

At midnight Joan opened her eyes. "My baby," she whispered.

"It is dead, Joan. Better, far better so, my dear. You must realize this. There, there, darling. Here—take this nourishment." Through the trembling lips Patricia almost forced a few drops of liquid. She saw weak tears roll down Joan's face. She wiped them away with tender touch, but her heart was hard and rebellious —not at Joan, but at what Joan had brought upon herself. Now and then Margot stealthily came into the room, performed little services, patted Joan's hand, and went out. Patricia napped—sitting in a deep and comfortable chair. She ate food that Margot set beside her. Joan slept on and on.

Toward morning Patricia started up. Joan was looking at her. Then, because she was sleepily confused, and perhaps because Joan seemed to have something to say —she must have asked questions, though she was never clear as to that. It might have been that Joan gave information without urging. Be that as it may, Patricia was hearing answers to her tortured doubts.

"Yes—Norman Grey. I'd rather die, Grandy, than

have him know. Remember that. *I'm* paying," a strange smile flitted over Joan's face, "I'm paying the Piper. You remember, Grandy?"

Patricia remembered.

"It's queer, Grandy, but I wish"—with a quiver—"it had lived. I meant—to play—fair. I had begun to—love it!"

"There, darling! It is far better as it is." Patricia repeated that fervently.

So quietly, naturally did Joan sleep after that brief talk that Patricia felt she dared go downstairs and speak to Margot. There would be arrangements, they must act carefully. There would be, there must be some way of legally dealing with this business. It must be done decently—in order, of course, but as quietly as possible. Margot always had "cases" on her hands, Margot could manage this undoubtedly, but it must be looked after at once and then forgotten!

Margot sat by the fire in the living room—on her knees lay the child. With all the arts at her command, prayerfully, desperately, Margot had brought the tiny creature back to life! There was a sense of exhilaration and achievement flooding Margot as she swayed back and forth crooning, crooning! She was lost to lesser considerations, she had saved a life!

The reasons for wishing the child dead were blotted out. One great fact remained: she, Margot, had been instrumental in clutching the child from death. She must *make* it live! It was up to her—the battle was on. Patricia, Joan—what were they compared to this little child?

Then Patricia walked across the floor. She stood by Margot before Margot realized her presence.

Margot whispered, "It's alive, my lady—a little girl."

Patricia did not speak for a moment; Margot's face puzzled her. Presently she whispered in return: "I have told Joan that it died. I believed that was so." Then: "Margot—it must be, to all intents and purposes. This child must remain dead."

For a full moment Margot's brain refused to function; she crooned on mechanically, but the sound of her own voice presently startled her into action. In a vague way she was conscious that she was looking upon Patricia Henley as she might upon a stranger. That thought brought a hysterical clutch in the throat. Margot was frightened. She realized, too, that she was being dominated, that she might be forced, unless she was alert, to do a dreadful thing. She was helpless, she couldn't even struggle, but she muttered: "It—is alive —my lady; not dead." Perhaps Patricia had not understood.

Then Patricia brought a chair close to Margot; she did not look at the baby so near to her. She must say hurriedly, concisely, what must be said and get back to the room upstairs where all that really mattered waited. She recalled how slowly Margot's mind always worked under excitement—she must simplify things.

"What I mean is this, Margot. The child is—illegitimate. All Miss Joan's future depends upon what we do now. The world isn't as much changed as foolish young people think it is—— Margot, you understand?"

So far, Margot understood perfectly.

"Now I must have time to think. The child, if it lives, is better off, safer here with you than anywhere else in the world. In a few months all may be different. I must have time, Margot; though I do not ask for gratitude I do ask for—coöperation."

Margot was listening closely.

"And—you'll tell Miss Joan, you'll let her know how it all was?" The reasonableness of the plea caught and held Margot's groping sense of justice.

"Of course Miss Joan must know—in time." The significance of this caused Patricia to falter.

Margot raised her honest but bewildered eyes to Patricia Henley's face. The child weakly stirred on her lap, it seemed too lifeless to make a cry. As she looked at Mrs. Henley Margot was again conscious of the feeling she had experienced before. She was afraid of something subtle that was beyond her understanding but which was drawing her within its power.

"You must trust me, Margot!" There was gentleness and suffering in the tone.

And then Margot said: "Yes, my lady." The struggle ceased.

The wind was rising—off among the hills came a rumble of thunder. From the room above a call: "Grandy!"

As Patricia turned and walked from the room she knew that power had been given her to control, to direct. She smiled—it was like returning to a kingdom from which she had been long banished, but in her eyes was born at that moment a fear that never left them, the fear of the day of reckoning.

There was, in the grove back of the farmhouse, a

little cottage that Margot had always kept in commission. When children swarmed over the place in summer it was a sanctuary. To that shelter now she carried the baby. The battle was not over; Margot's trained mind saw that. Too weak to cry or struggle, the child merely breathed.

Margot kept the temperature of the room even, she combated everything that menaced, but even so there were times when she lost hope. Necessarily she was away from the child much of the time. Her duties in the main house were many, and Joan must not see anything that might arouse her suspicions. Those were the hardest days of Margot's life.

Joan's recovery was rapid and perfect. Three days after the birth of her child the doctor at The Center called up. He had been kept at the lumber camp and was worn to exhaustion. "What was the matter?" he asked Margot.

"Oh! just a—natural enough thing," Margot held her breath for the next question, but the doctor was too weary to put himself in danger of knowing too much.

"Could you handle it?"

Again Margot breathed relievedly. "Yes. Everything is all right now."

The voice at the other end of the line was lost in a yawn. Then: "Well, I'm going to get some sleep. If you need me I'm here—Dr. Fleming." This was their little joke. Something like a prayer of gratitude rose in Margot's heart for the doctor's easily diverted curiosity.

Patricia's one aim now was to get Joan back to New York, and Margot longed for that relief. Patricia was

prepared to take chances and Joan's youthful rebound and courage spurred her on. Margot, almost spent, lent her aid.

"Grandy, please take me away. I want to—forget," pleaded Joan.

"Yes, my dear, you must forget!"

Joan turned her eyes to Patricia and there were tears in them. "You've paid a high price, dear Grandy," she whispered. "You look tired. I hadn't enough with which to pay. You remember?"

Patricia again remembered! She bent and kissed Joan. "And little enough have I given, darling," she whispered, "for your love and—trust."

Then, very brokenly, Joan faltered: "The—the baby, Grandy—where have they—buried it?"

"Dearest, Margot saw to all that."

Joan closed her eyes, the tears rolled down her thin cheeks. "Poor, dear little baby!" Then: "Did anyone have to know, Grandy?"

"No, my dear."

"And—it was all right—the secrecy, I mean?"

"Quite all right. Now, darling, rest."

"Grandy, I never want to come back here. Please make dear Margot understand. It's not ingratitude—all my life I will prove that—but I want to begin from now, from here—I mean to live, you know. Live really, Grandy."

Patricia, both elated and depressed, struggled to control her voice. "Margot will understand, my dearest. You are wise, very wise. Everything must be as if nothing had disturbed life."

At this Joan gave a little hysterical laugh and said:

"Oh! not that, Grandy. I think you do not quite understand. These months, this suffering, have swept away all that seemed safe and sure before. It is because I know so much more, that I want to begin a new life, since I cannot do anything to right the old one."

"Joan, you must rest, darling." Patricia was trembling. "You are getting feverish. Sleep and—do not trouble about anything."

Joan slept and ate and the color crept gradually into her cheeks. At the end of two weeks she sat up by the eastern window and looked out over the orchard and the open spaces beyond. She wondered where they had buried her baby. But she did not ask. She was beginning to accept Patricia's plans. The world looked very beautiful and young to Joan's awakened senses. She smelled the delicate odor of blossoms; she heard, as she had never heard before, the surprised twitter of birds in the morning, their glad songs at evening, their stirring in their nests at night.

Patricia's kiss upon her forehead thrilled her by its assurance of love and tenderness, and the look in Margot's brooding eyes made her wonder. Still, she asked no questions of Patricia any more. Joan was alive as she had never been before. Every sense was quickened and one day, taking advantage of Patricia's absence, she said to Margot: "All my life, Margot, I shall thank you, love you. And if I do not come back here, will you sometime come to me? I shall want you; but I would not dare to come back here. I am going to live, you know, I couldn't if I came back."

"My child, if you ever need me—I'll come to you."

"You promise, Margot?"

"I promise, my dear, my dear."

"Kind, good Margot! Bend close, I want to touch you, to feel the blessedness of you." Then: "You've taught me so much."

"Now, lass—" for Joan was hugging the work-worn hands against her young breast—"now, lass, my lady will be upset if you go on so."

"All right." Then, with a catch in her breath, "Margot, it's queer, but all this has seemed like one of your open spaces. A hard climb—but oh! how far one can see in every direction."

Margot, at this, bent and kissed the shining beauty of Joan's hair. Then she smiled one of her radiant smiles that illumined her plain face. " 'Tis in the open spaces that you'll be finding God, my lass," she ventured.

"Yes, Margot—I am looking for—God. I wanted you to—know."

Then Patricia's step on the stairs silenced them. Patricia had been to see the baby! There was no doubt in her mind but what the child would live. Margot had performed a miracle, but she had also, in doing so, created a situation that was going to loom over the future with growing danger and anxiety. Still Patricia did not flinch. She met every disturbing doubt with quieting compromise. "I will consult my lawyer. Put the case to him as one of my private interests." Then: "Of course, in a short time I may be convinced that it is best to tell Joan everything and let her—decide."

Patricia, quite in keeping with her disposition and age, was haggling with the Piper and dodging as best she could. Always she ended with the great and, indeed,

honest argument, "I am doing this for Joan's best good." Patricia sincerely believed that.

Three weeks after the child's birth Patricia, taking what few chances she recognized, got Joan away from the farm. Before leaving, and standing at the door of the little cottage with Margot, Patricia laid a roll of bills upon a table. Margot flushed. "I want the child now and always to have everything it needs," Patricia explained. "I will see to it that the future is secure."

"Yes, my lady. And Miss Joan?"

"She will know in time." Patricia dismissed this with a little frown. "That must be left to me, Margot. Now as to the—the child's name. I would like to have it called Elizabeth Ann—that was my mother's name." Patricia felt that it was the only name she could, with anything like safety, offer the child.

"Elizabeth Ann—what, my lady?"

The frown deepened. "For the present that must be all, Margot."

"Yes, my lady, but it seems not quite right." This was daring much.

"Right? What *is* right, Margot, in a case like this? There is just one just and sane thing to do. Go slow; take each step guardedly. All that I demand is—time in order that I may not make things worse for—yes, for the child. That would be a sad mistake."

And then Margot was left alone. She set her windows and doors open to the sweet and beautiful spring. she could not remember any spring ever being so lovely. She carried the baby to the main house, triumphantly, and created a background from which Bethan—the name dwindled to that—might emerge with as little

discredit as possible. "Yes, the poor young mother has left the bairn with me for a time."

How Patricia would have shuddered at this.

"Yes, there is erring among the high as among the lesser." In some way Patricia's money must be accounted for. Then: "I served long ago in the family. There's no sense or right in dealing out to the child——"

"You're right there!" a neighbor or two responded gallantly. They knew the fiber and tint of Margot's religion and service.

The story went the rounds, taking on strength and mettle, rebounding to Margot's character and then, as planting time and harvest time had to be considered, Bethan was accepted as a permanent feature in the community and left in peace.

CHAPTER IX

THE summer after Bethan's birth Patricia and Joan went to Canada. They settled in a quiet spot where there was good golfing and horseback riding, though neither of them indulged in the sports while there. Before they went Nancy disclosed her whereabouts and her immediate intentions in a letter of invitation and, as she humorously put it, "forgiveness."

I'm at the lodge, my dear, and am going to remain here until late autumn, anyway. My servants are reverting to type and are enjoying the process. I do not think they ever had a real vacation before. The women, on their leaves, usually go to visit needy relations, aged ones or young ones who are going to have babies. They come back tired and with depleted bank accounts; the men get drunk, more or less, and their bank accounts suffer. Up here they are free to come and go for nothing; in consequence they are developing consciences and gaining strength without beggaring themselves.

I shall never quite get over, Joan, your sneaking away as you did. When I do that people are indifferent, but you are so sane and normal that your action took on the appearance of crime. However, you have a perfect right to change your spots if you want to, but I'd like to see the form and color of your hide now.

Corlyss writes that you look wonderful. From Corlyss such praise smacks of shock—you must look exciting to move Corlyss to such words. Corlyss discovered my hiding place and hinted for an invitation, biding the divorce proceedings, but I told her we had contagious diseases up here. We would have had, had she come. Bob is living so pure and simple a life in the open that the Trents are at their wit's end. It's a long worm that has no turning!

What a blow to the Greys that marriage of Norman's is. [Joan had heard of Norman Grey's wedding while she was in town.] Just why men pay more than they have to for damaged whistles I never could imagine. They call it virtue, I suppose, not being clear about that trait.

And now, Joan, on your way back from Canada, I want you and Mrs. Henley to come here. I want this deeply, hungrily. I have a great plan to propose—an international proposition, and I want you to see what splendid work I've accomplished in house cleaning—not a musty ghost in the place!

Joan read this letter aloud to Patricia, and starting from the last of it, they considered it down to the first word.

"I'd like to see the effect of Nancy's overhauling," said Patricia. "I think we better accept."

"Oh! those contagious diseases and Corlyss," murmured Joan more to herself than to Patricia. Then: "Poor Norman Grey! Grandy, Norman always did pay too much for things—or wanted to. Anyone who could take advantage of him must be lacking in—in common sense and business ideals. They say this wife of his is unspeakably wrong."

"I used to fear, Joan——" began Patricia, but Joan stopped her.

"You need not have feared, Grandy. If I had loved him I would have married him. He played his game as he saw it, honestly enough. Do not let us ever talk about this again."

"And—oh! that sad-looking Robert Martin!" Patricia sprang ahead and turned her eyes from Joan's grave and brooding face.

"Yes. Really, when you come to think of it, Grandy,

there isn't much glory hovering over the heads of my friends. Corlyss looks as if one of Nan's ghosts was on her trail. She's never been worsted before."

And then Patricia gave a forced laugh. There was nothing to be gained by considering failures. "Nancy manages in spite of every effort in the opposite direction," she said, "to preserve a kind of halo around her head. Let us focus on Nancy. What she says about servants is exceedingly clever. We'll accept the invitation, Joan. Let us say the middle of September—her international plan may be amusing."

Joan's appearance certainly was all that Corlyss described it. She had never looked lovelier, and as her health returned she became vital and alert. She had hours of detachment upon which Patricia did not intrude, but about which she was curious. Still, on the whole, they were happier than they had been in some time. Something was going on in Joan's busy brain. That was clear enough. Her silences did not suggest a direct intention of shutting Patricia away, they were more like times for arranging and clarifying ideas before sharing them.

And indeed that was what Joan's detachments were for. Once she said a strange thing to Patricia. She was packing her trunk and Patricia, having accomplished her own work along that line, was sitting in Joan's room.

"Grandy—I was just thinking——"

"You do so much of that, my dear."

"One must, sometime. I'm catching up. Do you remember that summer we were in the Yellowstone Park, Grandy?"

Patricia nodded. "What now?" she thought.

"And the day we stood on that high and lonely crag and saw across the Gorge an eagle teaching its young to fly?"

Patricia turned searching eyes on Joan. She disliked this mood. "Yes—I remember."

"The eagle pushed the poor little scared bird out into space. We held our breaths—and then we saw the wonder of it all—the eagle flew below and spread its wings under the eaglet."

Patricia tried to think of something intelligent to say but could only manage, "Nature is really remarkable." This sounded banal, but Joan was not heeding.

She went on: "You should have pushed me out, Grandy!"

"Joan! Please do not get sentimental."

"I'm not. I'm growing practical by the hour. You see, Grandy, I had to plunge out."

"And you found?" Patricia humored the trend, hoping to escape easier; she was hoping that Joan would say that she had found her, Patricia. That would be so sweet.

"I found you and Margot underneath, darling—and I *think* I've found something else. I wanted you to know."

"What, Joan?"

"That's what I'm trying to make out, dear. It's something very real, that is as far as I've got. It may be —God."

Such moments as these worried Patricia and added to the growing unrest and fear. That was the worst of all—the fear! Patricia was afraid all the time, but

she had her moments of panic when Joan displayed evidence of soul growth. Joan with a well-developed soul would be difficult to deal with. If she were learning to trust something other than Patricia's power and guidance there was no telling how things would turn out at a crisis.

And so the strange look grew in Patricia's eyes—and in time Joan recognized it; grew to watch for it and resent it; wrongly, but none the less sufferingly.

"Grandy cannot forget!" she thought. "Now that the strain is over she condemns." It became the Look. The look of secret disapproval, anxiety for the future, a condemning look, indeed—but not a condemnation of Joan!

"Something must be done about this," Joan thought. "I'll see what Nan's plan is. I may fit in."

The weeks in Canada only confirmed Joan in her determination to rearrange her life. Alone with Patricia the strain became unbearable, and only the active walks, too long for Patricia to share, made it possible to endure the summer. Patricia was often gloomy—for the most part, silent. Joan thought that to ask her if she felt ill would be a weak subterfuge. Patricia was sound enough.

"To think that it is Grandy who is trying to put me in the seats of the sinners!" Joan gave a resentful shrug of her shoulders. "I believe if she saw me suffering, writhing under torture, she could forgive. As if it were a virtue to parade one's suffering that others may be aware of it." Joan more and more resented Patricia's "look," more and more she appeared to find joy in life and intense interest, but that Look defeated her.

Patricia had another cause of alarm later. Men were attracted to Joan and Joan seemed to revive.

"Is it possible that Joan so soon could forget?" Patricia's breath came quicker. And if she *did,* now or ever, how much must be told? How much dared they withhold in case Joan ever married? There were certain phases of the law relating to annulments of marriage that appalled Patricia. It was wicked, so she argued in her panic, that women were not allowed free choice in such matters. Would men have endured the law along these lines if the penalty for them were as drastic as for women? Patricia was beginning to have deep sympathy for the young women which only a short time ago she so bitterly and fearsomely resented. "They are at least putting up a struggle," she thought. And if Joan had suspected what Patricia was undergoing at that time, she would have better understood the Look!

But Joan walked and danced with pleasant young men and really never saw them in the deeper sense at all. They were indeed like shadows to her. Presently this attitude of mind gave her some concern. "I shall never marry," she concluded. "Not because of what lies behind me, but because I *know* what I must have. Nothing has ever stirred me—the real, lasting me, at all. I dare say I may be unstirrable, but at least I know." At this Joan looked as grave as a cripple might who watched the freedom of others; as the deaf might who watch, feel, but cannot hear. In some way she seemed to have defeated herself. There were times when she longed to talk all this over with Patricia, but when she drew near to any such confidence the Look in

Patricia's eyes chilled and hurt her. In this way, too, Joan had defeated herself, she believed.

It was the last week in September that Patricia and Joan went to Nancy's lodge, Deep Woods. The trees were red and gold as they had been a year ago; the skies were blue and the smell of wood fires was in the keen, thrilling air. Nancy met them at the station. She looked better, in many ways, than Joan had ever seen her, more rested and peaceful. She was perfectly dressed in honor of Patricia.

"The knickers and high boots go into the woods," she explained to Joan, "but for public observation I've made concessions all along the line."

Patricia regarded Nancy with mingled emotions. Always she had wondered why, in the past, Nancy managed to inspire confidence. Certainly she had done enough to destroy any such thing, but the fact remained there had never been a time when Patricia had not felt safer to have Joan with Nancy Holt than any other of her intimates. And now Nancy took on the proportions of a savior.

Patricia watched Nancy. Joan was sitting beside her on the front seat. Like part of the machinery, Nancy sat at the wheel. She talked and laughed, but her eyes were steadily fixed ahead. Her touch was light and sure—she seemed to be taking chances. Perhaps she *was,* but her far vision was always a little in advance of any danger.

"She sees the road ahead," Patricia reflected and leaned comfortably back. "And knows it. I can depend upon Nancy."

That was true, for when Nancy did not know she felt her way! But that, Patricia was never to know.

The bedrooms at the lodge were fragrant and charming, fires burned briskly on shining hearths, windows were opened to the color and sweetness of the woods. On Patricia's bed, conspicuously displayed, were knickers, long woolen stockings, and amazing boots.

Nancy followed Patricia into her chamber. She knew she had one piece of missionary work to do before she left her guest alone. "But, Nancy, my dear, at *my age!*" Patricia looked at the garment Nancy was holding out.

"There's no age limit to common sense, dear Mrs. Henley—once you start the thing. Besides, the men around the lodge—I suppose it *is* the men you are considering?—well, their suspicions might be aroused if you did *not* wear them, their curiosity too, when it comes to that. Now you and I know"—Nancy glanced comically toward Joan's door as if to make sure of not being overheard—"that there's nothing so dangerous to a mettlesome man as to keep him guessing. You have such beautiful legs, Mrs. Henley, that I do not want the males on my place to suspect you of being knock-kneed."

"Nancy!" But Patricia was laughing. It was good really to laugh because she could not help it. The success proved how stiff her mouth muscles had grown.

The still, throbbing days passed on magic wings; starlight, moonlight, and being part of the autumn glory bewitched them all.

Patricia slept well, ate well, and grew limber mentally and physically, but Joan was graver by far. If Nancy had laid all her ghosts, she had not laid Joan's.

She might have, had she known, but Joan struggled with her own haunting shadows and made no cry. She was not afraid of them but their strangeness was what interested her. That *she,* Joan Radcliffe, could ever have been lured by—what? That was what Joan sought to thoroughly understand. She grappled it—not as she had that day so long ago when she had first recognized its existence—but determinedly, with greater understanding. There was, or had been, evidently something in herself that lay in wait. If that were all, the danger was past. But there were possibilities. Joan recognized them: she might, under other but similar conditions, be taken off guard. She had felt sure of herself before. Just what was it that menaced an off hour with her?

Nancy might tell her. There were traits about Nancy that assured one that in off hours she would be most alert. Corlyss Trent had understood, but Corlyss still made Joan shudder.

Over the hidden trails Joan walked, often alone, thinking of Norman Grey. But Grey could not be made *real.* He was like a shadow lurking but quickly dispelled by a ray of honest thought.

"If I had died I couldn't have been more surely separated from it all." Joan at last reached this conclusion. "I don't suppose people go on wasting, what hereafter there may be, by trying to make shadows into substance. If I had ever loved Norman, or thought I had, it would have been different. But as it is, the past is like something gone indeed."

And then one night Nancy and she had their talk. Patricia, healthfully tired from a five-mile walk beside a hurrying mountain brook, had gone to bed. The blaz-

ing outdoor fire was like a warm, glowing heart in the midst of the black night. Just so it had been, Joan thought, when she had escaped from herself and gone with Norman Grey over a hidden trail into the bewitched night. Well! she had come back—alone!

"Joan!" The ruddy glow of the fire seemed to pick Nancy out from the shadows. She sat hunched, small and vivid. Through the youthful look of her the maturity of her spoke:

"Joan, aren't you sick of it all?"

Joan almost asked "What?" but caught herself in time. She knew.

"Oh! the things we've done, been expected to do—probably will keep on doing?"

"Yes. Don't they turn your mental stomach?"

"Sometimes. Yes."

"I think Corlyss, and now Norman Grey, have just torn the bandage from the eyes of both of us. Up to now I owned up to only *one* blind eye. It has been like playing blindman's buff and then suddenly finding out that everyone was hiding, anyway."

"Yes. But what is one to do, Nan? If you're born into something, as long as the something claims you, what can you do? You and I cannot sneak out of responsibilities."

"I have a big idea."

"Oh, yes! I remember. An International One."

"It may be." Nancy was not laughing. Her little dark face was serious, her eyes calm and purposeful. "I gave up the hope long ago, Joan, of reforming the world, or anybody in it. But lately it has come to me that it is possible to put it, and people, into uniform."

Joan laughed. "Wouldn't that be a bit more awful?" she asked. "I think I'd like to have a variety, even if the total didn't make a hit."

"Variety? Of course." Nancy saw the point. "But specialized variety."

"For instance?" And now Joan paid attention.

Nancy settled to her task. She relaxed, and her curled-up body stretched out on the pine needles was safeguarded from the fire by a circle of stones. "Let us go into business, Joan."

"You want to make more money, Nan?"

"No. I want to lose it legitimately. I'm willing to pay for high adventure, but I'm dead set against paying a big price for any more slow rot. Listen, Joan."

CHAPTER X

JOAN listened, asking a few questions now and again, watching Nancy's face as the firelight played upon it, and presently grew to understand that Nancy had passed through some crisis and, characteristically, was plunging into greater activity in order to get the mastery of herself.

"I came to the conclusion, Joan, that I and my life needed a general overhauling. When I reach a conclusion I like to maul it awhile, so I came up here and—mauled. The conclusion was all right. I'm ready to put it into action and I'd like to have you go into a venture with me."

"For losing money, Nan? You see I haven't as much as you have."

"You need not put a cent in, Joan, all I want is—you in it. I'm through with certain things—the idea of marriage, for one——"

"Have you let Ted Roland into *that* secret?" Joan watched Nancy.

"Yes"—this came gravely—"he rather drove me to it. It wasn't fair to accept all that Ted offered, knowing as I did that I never could repay him. Every time he asked me to marry him I tried to make it plain, but I always held out a nibble, and poor Ted is rather a magnificent nibbler. None of the meek and lowly kind, just—— Well, you know, Joan!"

"Yes, I know. Poor old Ted."

"Exactly," Nancy nodded. "Then another thing," she went on, "I'm through with Europe!"

"Oh, Nan! No one is ever through with the other half of the world."

"I am. Like a greedy creature, Joan, I've overeaten along several lines. I'm—surfeited! So then—in this business venture I want you to be, in a way, buffer and buyer." Here Nancy gave a broad, impish grin. "When I do not want to see people and you are in town I want to put your stunning self between me and them. They'll never resent not having me when they can have you."

"Thanks, Nan."

"Don't mention it. I'm deadly earnest. Then when it comes to buying, let me explain. After a bit our clientele will be mobbing us, and it must be kept hungry and satisfied at one and the same time. Satisfied with what we give them and hungry for more."

"I—do not understand, Nan. Hungry for what?"

"I'm coming to that now. Before I left town I was calling on some people—you do not know them; they are old and boring friends of Grandfather's. I call on them once in a while for his sake. Well, you should have seen their servants' livery. The people are newly rich and an interior decorator has put it all over the poor creatures, and the servants' livery was a crime, as well as the house. I suggested fitting out the men and maids properly and chiming their uniforms into a general color scheme of the place. When I came to that I realized that the color scheme was a riot. When I pointed this out my hostess went into sobs and said that she *felt* it, but was—was inarticulate. Isn't that

choice, Joan? Inarticulate when it came to expressing herself in her own home? She put the whole mess up to me. I'm going to reconstruct her house and re-dress her servants. That means I am going to see it properly done. While I was brooding over that I suddenly had a vision.

"Joan, think of the uniforms of theater ushers—the big theaters, I mean. Why, they're brutal and make the poor girls or boys look like monkeys. I've expressed myself to several managers. Two have thrown themselves at my head. Then, to clap the mounting climaxes, Paula Leonard dropped down on me one day; remember Paula?"

Joan nodded.

"Well, her husband has arrived at the dangerous age and is turning, spiritually, to young girls. They've fed him up to such an extent that he's driven Paula to desperation. She was out for a divorce, and said that to sit around and watch proceedings was driving her mad. I suggested a tea room. You know Paula is a genius along such lines. I urged her to get busy and look in another direction for a time. She has money and more common sense than I suspected.

"Joan, I have an order to select a tea room, furnish it, dress the waitresses——"

"Why—Nan!" Joan stopped the flow. "Just what has happened to you, Nan?"

"I don't know—yet. Honestly, Joan, I do not know, *really*. Something has set me adrift and I'm making for any old port that offers peace and—and self-respect. Joan, I want you to go abroad after we get established and nose around anywhere, everywhere, you and Mrs.

Henley are professionals along those lines. Pick up all the marvelous things you can find. Can't you visualize it, Joan? Our 'rooms,' not offices, perfectly gorgeous places for people to come and dump their troubles and for us to derecorate them and re-uniform them morally, mentally, and physically?"

"Is this a monumental joke, Nan?"

"I never was as serious in my life before."

"It will mean a terrific outlay before a cent comes in."

"I'm prepared for that—so is my lawyer. He is fuming while I'm getting a thrill. If I lose—well, I'm a fairly good loser and I'll tie up enough for an Old Woman's Home fee. Joan, will you plunge with me?"

Joan considered. After all, if she did not join Nancy someone else would. Nancy was determined. To her, at least, this was no idle dream. On the other side it offered occupation, excitement, and an excuse for getting away at time from the growing tenseness of conditions in Patricia's home.

"Nan, I tremble at what Grandy will say!"

"Nice old Joan! So you *will* plunge? Leave Mrs. Henley to me. I got her into knickers. I can get her into a mental condition of independence. I'll put it up to her —the thing she's doing. She's paving the way to that hell of old age—absorption of the young. I've seen signs of it all along. She's got her clutch on you now. Joan, she must let go for your sake and her own."

"Nan, I owe everything to Grandy." Joan felt her throat burn.

"No, you don't. You only owe her some things, among them is the self-respect and good comradeship

that are quite possible, but which are often strangled. I'm helping to prevent that."

"Nan, *are* you wise or just plain impish?"

"I'm not sure, even of that, Joan."

The next day the plan, in serial form, was given to Patricia. At breakfast she was offered the sketchy outline, but Patricia was incapable of taking things seriously at breakfast. She laughed.

At noon, by a wild, plunging stream, she was given more, and on an empty stomach. Joan was preparing the camp meal.

"Of course this is sheer madness, Nancy," Patricia said. "And your lawyers will put their feet down."

"They have, and taken them up again."

"You will squander your future."

"I could do it in a worse way. Besides, Joan will steady me."

"Joan?"

"Yes, we're going to form a partnership."

Patricia looked angry. "Of course I have no control over the small income Joan has of her own, but——"

"There, there, Mrs. Henley, keep your pretty flannel shirt open at the throat. Joan isn't going to put in a copper. She's going to be the ornamental part, and with you as her background I'm afraid I'll *make,* not lose money."

Patricia, unconsciously, was loosening the collar of her khaki shirt. "I had thought——" she faltered.

"Yes, I know, and, dear Mrs. Henley, please think again. It would be so easy to—to eat Joan up pound by pound, but you're not *that* kind of grandmother.

After a while Joan would nauseate you—she's indigestible at times."

Patricia Henley drew her slim figure up rigidly—she had rather slumped lately and had gained five pounds. "I think you are both as mad as any two I ever heard of," she muttered. Then: "I suppose you've engaged your 'rooms,' as you call them?"

Nancy had not, but she nodded assent.

"Well—you can at least try and fail."

"Exactly. Or we may try and ignominiously succeed." Nancy grinned.

"Is it your plan that Joan should spend much time abroad?"

Nancy considered. The slow relaxing of Patricia Henley's hold on Joan touched her heart. "That depends upon Joan's ability to get about and haggle."

"Perhaps I can go with her, now and then," timidly.

"Oh! Mrs. Henley, that would add to Joan's value in the firm."

There were two weeks more of Deep Woods and then the cold grew intense. Outdoor meals were impossible and, with shut windows, the charm vanished.

"When I dread to put my feet on the floor as I get out of bed," said Patricia one day, "I hanker for the home trail."

Joan laughed. "You're talking wood stuff, Grandy."

"Yes, I've got it in my blood."

"Good scout!" Nancy broke in. "But I'm for the home trail, too."

And so they journeyed back. Nancy and Joan plunged into business at once. A lovely suite of rooms was se-

lected on Madison Avenue at a price that appalled Joan but delighted Nancy. The furnishing was absorbing.

"No good in advertising unless we can prove right here what taste and influence we have," Nancy insisted. Joan agreed to that. So Nancy's private "Consulting Room" was prayerfully conceived and brought into existence. Joan's "Retreat" was really a perfect little library; the Reception Room, with several desks for typists, was large and handsomely furnished. "A regular lure," Nancy declared. "I cannot imagine any client failing to fall for us after gazing about."

Neither could Joan. She felt success was possible in spite of all the dismaying things lawyers, Ted Roland, and Patricia felt called upon to express.

The winter following was a busy one. No step was unconsidered. Nancy was thorough and painstaking, and Joan was soon absorbed. Just after Christmas, when the suite of rooms was ready for inspection, there were teas given. These were engineered by Mrs. Leonard and proved great successes.

Paula Leonard, her eyes once off her husband, seemed to be unconscious of his delinquencies. At first he was delighted at this and then he grew restive. Paula was not running true to form. Of course he did not want to break Paula's heart or anything like that, but certainly it was something of a shock to see one's wife regard so lightly—— Well! Leonard was indignant, hurt, and interested!

Nancy was elated. "First case a perfect cure!" she said.

Then the newly rich Conants with their transformed

house and smartly uniformed servants caused nibblers at Nancy's rooms to become gulpers.

"In another year, Joan," Nancy said, "you'll have to beat it! We'll need new ideas and new things. The secret of success lies in keeping folks guessing—watch the Leonards!"

Theodore Roland, amazed at the progress of what he still thought would be a failure, offered to keep Nancy's books. This would at least give him a legitimate reason for keeping his eye and touch on Nancy and place him in a confidential position. Nancy, to his surprise, was charmed with the idea. It gave *her* a legitimate hold on Roland. She could not set him free entirely.

"It's all going out and nothing coming in," Roland announced at Easter.

"But the signs point to a change of wind," Nancy cheerfully replied.

"I see no such indication, Nan."

"I feel it in my bones and by the twitching of my common sense."

"Pure bunk! You should put on the brakes, Nan."

"And you should shift your gears, Ted."

That first summer neither Joan nor Nancy left town, but Patricia went to California in rather an indignant mood. The truth was that Patricia could not live up to Nancy's ideal of her. "I'd best take myself off," she said, and felt like a self-made exile. She was conscious of curious gazes. She was not looking well, her clothes were more or less neglected. Joan took no heed. Patricia was sorry for herself, and her secret was eating into her life.

"They are driving me rather hard," she said in self-pity, and then in desperation went out and bought new clothes. She felt better for the exercise and extravagance, but her mood persisted. Under the superficial sense of change and neglect Patricia was suffering from real and devastating trouble. She was always afraid. Margot's letters were, in one sense, reassuring. The child prospered and Margot's craving for love and something of her own upon which to lavish her adoration and service were gratified. She was, were the truth known, more fearful of anyone discovering Bethan than Patricia was. She no longer mentioned Joan's name.

"It would be like dragging the soul out of me," Margot thought, "if they took the bairn from me." And then gradually she withdrew. She wrote less and less to Patricia, often at times she merely jotted down items on her acknowledgments of checks, stating Bethan's improvements. Patricia's money, directly and indirectly, was expended upon little Bethan or put in the bank for her. The child was prettily dressed. Oh! how Margot pored over catalogues! She was daintily fed and cared for.

A man and his wife now occupied the little cottage in which baby Bethan had at first been hidden; their service left Margot free to care for Bethan. "I'll need my time and thought for the bairn," Margot reasoned, "but my lady's land must not be neglected." Playing with Bethan, watching over her and noting every change in the lovely little creature, gave Margot a new outlook on life, and as time passed and she was left in peace

she dared to bear the weight of her happiness upon the present.

Bethan, like many another child, once convinced of the value of life, responded joyously and throve accordingly. She never was ill and, apparently, never was tired until at the day's end she stretched her little body on her bed in a pose that fascinated, but sometimes saddened, Margot. This pose of Bethan's was beautiful. She lay on her side, her face uplifted and thrown a bit forward, her arms lying a little behind the body like resting wings. "She looks," Margot often thought, "like an angel floating." Floating was hardly the word, for the child was quiet and restful, but she gave that impression.

Then another peculiarity of Bethan caused Margot to watch her with brooding and puzzled eyes. The child cared little for toys—though Margot selected them almost prayerfully also from the catalogues. She accepted them, kissed them, and carefully set them in a row. The row stretched across the window ledges in bedroom and living room. Having done that, the baby considered her duty done and turned to her own pleasures. These consisted in chasing a sunbeam, when the little feet learned to walk and run; gleefully the child darted here and there, laughing, never disappointed because she could not clutch and hold. A fluttering leaf—when warmer weather gave a wider world—provided Bethan with endless pleasure, and she would lie for hours on her back under the trees watching a floating cloud or stirring trees.

"It's amazing," thought Margot, and prayed the prayer that loving mothers have prayed since the world

began. Haltingly ending with, "But Thy will, not mine, be done."

And so things were when Patricia went to California, and little Bethan learned to toddle out into the open spaces of the lonely farm led by Margot's hand.

CHAPTER XI

ANOTHER winter passed, and one day in the early spring Nancy, fresh from a business interview with Roland, came into Joan's study—it had become that: a place in which to consider problems and suggest solutions. Nancy's private office was where the Big Ideas were set in motion.

"Joan," Nancy said, holding out a balance sheet, "what do you think? We're making money. A lot of it."

Joan leaned back and smiled. "I felt it in my bones. I thought it was spring fever. Nan, if we needed money success we would have gone on the rocks. As it is—well! don't you feel as if something were wrong?"

"I certainly do not!" Nancy was flushed with triumph, the joy of the hunt possessed her. "After our toil and sacrifice, Joan, I wonder at you. My dear, I understand the giants of finance at last. They do not care for the loot, but oh! the power of getting it!"

Nancy sat on the edge of Joan's table and swung her feet. "And now for the next thing. Joan, my dear, I want you to go across to the other side and *snoop*."

"I've been expecting this, Nan. If we don't look out we'll be duplicating things."

"Exactly. Now go and spend and—who cares what you spend? Go to overlooked corners. There's where you'll find what we want. Rugs—some tapestries and

anything else that will help us to startle and keep ahead of the game. Will you go?"

"Yes, but how about Grandy? Nan, Grandy troubles me."

"I see what you mean, Joan, but really Mrs. Henley is not up to such a trip as you are going to take."

"I know it, Nan. That's just it. On the other hand, if I go alone I'll be anxious and not keen on bargains."

"I have a plan. Mrs. Henley loved the lodge. She revived up there in a most amazing way. Let me ask her to come to the woods with me—I mean to spend as much time there as I can this summer. If she gets bored I'll take a trip with her somewhere. We might join you at the end of your time."

Joan looked into the distance, her eyes dimmed. "Nan, Grandy is growing old and I thought she never would."

"I thought that about Grandfather, Joan. It's horrid to see them break."

"And Nan, somehow, there seems to be something between Grandy and me that is keeping us apart. The together-ness feeling is gone. I believed that, at least, was secure."

"Perhaps that comes with the ageing process, Joan." Nan looked serious. She had noticed this. Once she had remarked to Roland: "Mrs. Henley actually looks afraid of Joan at times, and then perks up and resents it. She's got something on her mind." She thought of this now.

"She's been wonderful, Nan," Joan whispered. "More wonderful than anyone will ever know—but I

cannot get close to her any more. In a way she pushes me off."

"All the more reason why she and I should be together for a time. Like most of my good friends, she disapproves of me but likes me," Nancy smiled. "I will promise, Joan, to keep you in close touch with everything."

"All right, Nan. I'll sail as soon as I can get accommodations."

"Good! and shower all the loathsome American money you want to upon our eager but resentful friends. There'll be plenty more to come—I feel power!"

Three weeks later Joan sailed.

Mrs. Henley, with flattering delight, accepted Nancy's invitation. She even overreached Nancy's plans. "My dear," she said, "I would like to go at once and be there to welcome you!"

"Splendid!" Nancy agreed. "Having someone meet and welcome me will be a thrilling experience."

"I left my knickers in the closet," said Patricia.

"They'll be there but the chipmunks have probably chewed them. Better order some new ones," Nancy suggested. Then: "I'm going to send my cook and old Jacob up with you, dear."

"But, Nancy, who will care for you here?"

"There'll be two maids left and I'll close part of the house. When I feel a gnawing in my stomach for good food, I'll run away to you." And so it was happily arranged and Nancy settled to weeks of hard work and many hours of lone unrest. Her work was her salvation, but there were times when tempests raged in

Nancy's soul. For months after John Welling went she heard no word from him, and then he wrote a long letter.

The man arguments were stressed. The man's need of her, the wretchedness of being alone where they had been together. The uselessness of it all. "Just because you cannot have the big thing of our lives served in your way, you push it from you. You poor, foolish, starving girl."

And that is what Nancy was at her worst moments —starving and baffled. Starving for what John Welling alone could give her, but which she could not accept. If he had been a lesser man, if he had been willing to do the only thing that might have righted things—why then—— When Nancy reached that point she came to a sharp halt. *Had* he been that kind she never could have loved him as she did. His devotion to his children equaled his passion for her. She knew that; she honored him. Of course he could not put them out of his life; darken theirs. The hard, calculating woman who loomed over this tragic situation was entrenched, that also Nancy knew. It was a hideous snarl and she was incapable of unsnarling it.

The memory of those glory-lighted spots in Nancy's life when she had roamed through Italy with Welling was all the glory left to her now. Of course no one in the world could be expected to believe how marvelous those months had been. No one but Nancy and John Welling could possibly have lived out that magic but soul-trying test. But they had done it! And now John Welling, naturally enough—Nancy was cruelly honest with herself—believed her hard, cold, and scheming; a

heartless, sexless creature who had betrayed him! In reality Nancy knew she was none of these things. She had always meant to cast everything to the winds and accept Welling on his own, his only decent terms. She had believed she could. What did anything in life mean to her compared to John Welling?

And then, suddenly, while she had argued thus in the woods, she remembered Corlyss Trent. Corlyss showed what some things meant, no matter how you disguised them, and Nancy knew that she couldn't go to Welling. She was powerless, numb, and inarticulate. "I'm not moral," she reiterated. "I want to go—I must go, at least to tell him, to try and make him understand." But Nancy made no move to go to Welling. She turned desperately to her work; she even considered Roland as a bleak solution. "He'd be something of my own, at least." Then a wave of contempt rescued her. "None of Corlyss's tactics," she thought. "Lord! what a warning and a blazing danger signal Corlyss is."

Nancy did not write to Welling for months; when she did, she did not try to explain anything but her work, her new interests. That letter made Welling wholesomely angry. For more months Nancy did not hear from him. Having known the joy of Nancy's deeper friendship, Welling refused to accept what he too truly sensed was her most dangerous offering.

"We couldn't stand another abnormal contact. Better cut it out," he had grimly concluded. "I'm not *that* kind, thank God! And neither is she, even if she does not realize it. We're flesh and blood creatures—both of us." Just *what* kind he was *not,* Welling did not seek

to classify, but he wasn't going to play the fool. He remained abroad a year, then came home.

"And this is all!" Nancy at last was forced to accept the inevitable. "And it was such a lovely thing to fizzle out so." If it had been less lovely it would not have fizzled out, but Nancy could not take even such comfort as this might have brought. She was simply miserable and plunged deeper into work. That, added to a hot, sultry spell of weather, brought her perilously near a break. Strange to say, it was demands made upon her by others, not thought for herself, that revived her.

Norman Grey came back to New York, and trailing behind him were rumors of defeat and—his wife! Grey had not taken to detachment kindly, but he had taken to drink in the hope of stupefying his senses. In this he had succeeded to such an extent that when he met Laurine Temple of the Star Folly Company and found her diverting and sympathetic, he lost his power of estimating values and confused Laurine's high price for maiden virtue; and, "like a gentleman," did not haggle over the transaction during his besotted spells. Laurine's little home had been as carefully set as any stage, and while continuing to charm, she warded off any useless gestures on Grey's part to create a transient form of companionship. As Laurine brightened in wiles, Grey edged nearer like the poor moth he was, and before he knew it—he never was able to explain *how* it was done—he married Laurine and went to her place to live. And then it was that Laurine made her tactics clear and definite. She compelled Grey to write to his people. Of course they were shocked. Then Laurine demanded that she be taken to New York and recognized.

"We can come back here for the next season's contracts. A wedding trip is due us," she urged.

Grey was appalled. He was sick, too, but he complied. When he reached New York his people were frightened at his appearance and Laurine dismayed them. The usual sequence followed. Mrs. Grey's mother-heart did some unwise pleading and the father, unable to resist his wife's grief and prayers, submitted to the inevitable and tried to stand behind the tragedy that had befallen, and give it some appearance of respectability.

Secretly, Laurine thought her husband's people the "last word," but she was keen enough to realize their potentialities. A big comfortable house—grim as a tomb, to be sure—plenty of money, and the old folks nearing the end. Certainly there was something to work with and Laurine decided to "work." She shattered all hopes from the start for a happy solution. She made no pretense nor held out any deceits.

To Norman she said, at the end of the first week in New York: "Well, what are we going to do about it?"

And Grey shrugged his shoulders. There was no putting Laurine in her place. Apparently her place was where she happened for the moment to be. Old Mr. Grey, who could control big business operations and cause Boards to show respect to him, seemed at once, and visibly, to shrink from the ordeal Laurine represented.

Norman Grey, with his wife on the scene, became sufferingly aware of her "difference" and turned impotently away. He had always known she *was* different, but it had not affected him at a distance. She had, then, been too necessary to his comfort and pleasure, but in

the orderly and conventional home of his stately mother and stern father, Laurine evolved into something positively shocking to his slumbering sense of decency. He offered one suggestion to her: "Let's make a little visit and then go back."

But Laurine turned on him. "See here," she spoke quietly enough, "who paid for this trip up here?"

"Oh! that's all right, Laurine, I'll make that up to you."

"No, sir! Your dad and I will have a business talk before you and I go anywhere. From what I've seen of New York I rather like it, but I'll do this much for your folks—I'll keep off the stage here. I'll do the home stunt. It's about time I retired, anyway."

"Dad's never failed to send a check," Norman broke in, "he'll make it easy for us if we go back."

"He'll double the check and then I'll consider terms." Laurine broke in and viewed herself in a mirror. "I don't know as I'd care to live with your people," she continued. "My brains would get stiff along with the rest of me, but a nice little flat near by, since the neighborhood's pleasant—I wouldn't object to that."

Norman drooped in his chair. He'd tried his best. He vaguely realized the brutality of all this to his people. A sense of shame overcame him. Back in the old environment Laurine seemed to have had some meaning, but now, weak and ignoble as it sounded, she meant absolutely nothing, nothing! There were times when, gazing upon her, Grey confusedly wondered *why,* indeed, she was there. But more and more Laurine convinced him as to her present meaning, and Grey endured his life with what courage he could. He no longer drank,

he spent as much time out of the house as possible. He did not seek friends—he wanted most of all to avoid them. Once, driven desperate by Laurine's nagging, he took a brief and hopeless stand. He and Laurine were alone in his mother's sitting room. Laurine was smoking and Mrs. Grey, sickened by the fumes and heat, had gone away.

"See here, Laurie," Norman exclaimed, "we're going to get out to-morrow!"

"All right, Normie, where are we going?" This took Grey off his guard. He paused and Laurine went on: "If we're going, your dad and I must have a little powwow to-night. I don't go anywhere, see? until I have a clear understanding as to where I'm going and how much I have to live on."

"What do you mean, Laurine?" Norman felt his courage oozing, the beaten look spread over his face.

"I mean to collect all the facts that are drifting about at loose ends and put them into a shape—I'll make a proposition. It looks to me, Normie, as if it was up to me to support you, care for you. At a fair price I'll undertake the job."

Grey shuddered and his eyes fell. He shook his head despairingly.

"I believe in dealing with principals," Laurine went on brutally, and continued to light one cigarette from another.

Just then dinner was announced.

They went down to dinner—a cheerless affair. Laurine did not talk much; she was doing some rapid and clear thinking. After dinner Grey, hoping to forestall Laurine, went into the library with his father.

Laurine, undismayed, followed her mother-in-law to the drawing room.

"You don't smoke, do you?" she asked Mrs. Grey as she had many times before.

"I've never acquired the habit, and my husband only smokes in the library or his office." The answer, too, had been given before.

Laurine lighted a cigarette and puffed luxuriously. At least the smoke dimmed the solemnity of the old room as she looked about. A half hour passed, then Laurine, quite at her ease, announced: "If you don't mind, I'll steal away to the boys."

Mrs. Grey merely gasped; before she could utter a protest, Laurine was out of sight.

Norman never forgot that scene in the library. Laurine entered. There was always a trained grace in her movements. She sat down on the arm of a chair, ignoring Grey utterly. Then she lighted a fresh cigarette and swept into the whirlpool with directness and courage. With some truthfulness she picturesquely set forth ugly facts. She sketched Norman's career in South America, his advances to her, her virtuous withdrawals, her belief that she might "save" him, her disillusionment and all the rest. Old Mr. Grey listened with blanched face.

"I toned him up. I haven't a lot of what you might call polish," Laurine was saying, "but I did my best for your son and I've kept myself to myself for his sake when I've had plenty of opportunity to sack him. I know what I'm up against and I don't mince matters—I find it never pays."

"Laurine, for God's sake!" Norman put in. His father's face frightened him.

"Hands off!" Laurine said pleasantly. "Your turn'll come and so will everyone else's. Now—how about it?" This to Mr. Grey.

For a moment John Grey looked at Norman and a wave of pity swept over him. As a father and a man he began to comprehend what all this must mean to his son; then he remembered the woman in the room beyond—his wife, the mother of his son. Lastly he fixed his eyes—stern, cold eyes they were—on the calm, handsome young woman swinging her legs from the arm of his deep leather chair. Somewhere, in the back of his startled brain, there was registering a conviction that the young woman was one to take seriously. She had a very good hand of cards and she knew how to play it. This was no matter of blackmail, it was a cool business deal. Of course he, John Grey, could do the equivalent of kicking the young pair out of his house and then have his shoes polished, but he had not the slightest temptation to resort to such a course. His heart was aching for his boy and for that boy's mother.

"What is your proposition?" he asked at last, calmly.

"Money enough to live decently on, here or somewhere else. I'm tired of dancing and a woman has a time when, if she's wise, and can, she gives her public a kick and seeks safer quarters. My time's come. I like Norman, we get on fine, but I see the danger. We were always straight, first and last we kept to the middle of the road. Ask him."

John Grey forebore. Instead he said: "What would you consider a decent way of living?"

"Oh! a little flat; nice neighborhood. I could do the work with a little help. I like housework. There may be children. I like kids when they can be supported properly. To make a long story short, I'd like—well, what your daughter would like if you had one."

John Grey shuddered. "And my present contribution to my son is not sufficient for you—your ambitions?" he asked.

Laurine glanced at her father-in-law as a furtive little animal might who suspected a trap with which she was unacquainted. "No, sir!" she said simply.

Then John Grey turned to his son. "With your wife's permission, I would like to hear what you have to say to this, Norman."

"Father!" Norman Grey's eyes dropped. "Father, I refuse absolutely any offer of money you may possibly make." The words came shamedly but firmly.

"Well, I like that!" gasped Laurine, and dropped to her feet.

"I'm glad you feel as you do, my son," John Grey went on, "but I had no intention of enlarging my check. As long as I live, and can, you may expect the allowance I have given you. I will, if you decide to remain in New York, help you to a position. I sympathize with your wife about your business failures, but as to your private affairs, the manner of life you decide upon, how you spend your money, what friends you make—such things I will not interfere with at all."

"That sounds easy—here, now," Laurine flared angrily. "Suppose I take to—to dancing again? Suppose——"

John Grey stopped her. "If you follow your career

respectably," he said, "you will hold your position in my thought as my son's wife; if you disgrace it I shall forbid you coming to my home. I hope you understand that the time is passed when a family can be damned by such methods as you apparently have in mind. It seems to me that you have everything to gain by behaving yourself and—and—indulging in the pastime you say you like—housework."

For a moment Laurine wondered if the old gentleman confronting her had a sense of humor. She decided he had not but was merely putting up a bluff. "You may change your mind," she said huskily, and flounced out of the room. Norman followed.

The next day Norman and Laurine left the old house; they took a small, furnished apartment a mile away. "I'll bring him round," Laurine thought. "I've never failed yet." But she saw the wisdom of not breaking with the Greys.

Norman, on his part, chastened, shamed, and helpless, went, at the end of a fortnight, to his father. "Dad, for God's sake help me once again."

"There is no way out—from that woman?" asked John Grey.

"No!" Norman turned his eyes away. "She's not altogether what you think her, Dad."

"We won't go into that, Son. I'll help you to help yourself. I mean just that. I can give you a position, one in which you will have a chance to rise. So long as you do your part you will keep it; if you fail you must leave it. It is important enough for that."

Norman took the position, and partly to escape life in his own home, did his work with credit and spent his

Sunday evenings with his father and mother. Laurine refused to join the party, though she was always asked.

"My digestion wouldn't stand it," she explained; "instead I'll go and see what New York likes in the way of dancing."

CHAPTER XII

It was at one of those Sunday evenings that Grey met Nancy Holt. Nancy, hearing something of what the Greys were enduring, had shaken off the depression that had all but overcome her and gone to her old friends.

Nancy was something of a shock to Grey. He had tried to keep out of her way; realizing this, Nancy had not waited for an invitation to the Grey house. "I just —came," she smilingly explained. "I never run the risk of being turned down. I'm something like Corlyss Trent in that way."

Norman, after the first moment of shrinking—and this aroused Nancy's sympathies—came rather eagerly forward. He found that he was genuinely glad to see Nancy, and old Mr. and Mrs. Grey beamed gratefully upon her. Grey soon began to ask questions; it was so restful and delightful to be sitting there once more in his father's house with Nancy quite at her ease, gossiping merrily.

"But where have you been all this time?" Nancy questioned in turn. "I don't indulge in scandal, but dear me! it is in the air. No need for you to hide, Norman." This was daring.

"I've been up to my eyes getting readjusted," Norman explained. He knew he should say something about Laurine, but her name choked in his throat. Nancy

patted his arm familiarly—she was sitting close to him —noting his tired eyes and bent shoulders.

"How's Joan?" This name slipped glibly enough from Grey's tongue.

"Fine. She's off buying what is left to buy over seas. If Joan and I had been at starvation's door this business of ours would have gone on the rocks. As it is, we're forging ahead. You see we got fed up with people—well, like Corlyss Trent and with the things she represented."

"And like me and my doings?" Nancy liked the spirit with which Grey met her daring. He seemed willing to be intimate. Again she patted the arm near her.

"You're a nice Returned Prodigal, Norman. Veal or lamb—which is it? it will not choke you."

Old Mr. Grey was dozing in his chair by a distant window; Mrs. Grey was reading, but she caught a word now and then.

"Veal!" she said, starting up with a little twinkle in her eyes. "That makes me think of supper. Cook is out. These Sunday night meals are very informal." She got up and left the room.

"And I always help Mother!" Mr. Grey came out of his nap refreshed. "It's my one opportunity of snitching things from the ice box."

"Nan, you've put new life in us," Norman said when the door closed after the Greys. The soft air came gently into the room between the curtains. Norman closed his eyes for a moment as if afraid of betraying some weakness.

"He looks sick and beaten," thought Nancy with pity. "And once you're squashed it doesn't matter what

squashed you or whether it is your own fault or another's. Squash is squash!"

Then Grey opened his eyes. "And so Joan looks fine?" he said gravely, and Nancy knew that he wanted to talk about Joan now that they were alone.

"Yes, and she is fine, Norman. Joan was always a puzzle to me in the old days. So like a little girl pretending that she was a grown-up. She is only beginning to be a grown-up now and it surprises her as much as it does others."

"It would," Grey ventured.

"It's queer, Norman, but when one begins to feel old age creeping on"—Nancy waited for the laughing denial, but none came—"the maddest things get you. Did you ever get the idea that there is something in each one of us that never is interfered with? Something that stands off aloof rather surprised at things the other parts of us do? Of course, I'm saying this like a donkey, but do you get me, Norman?"

"Perfectly." This came so convincingly that Nancy went on with courage.

"Well—somehow, some way Joan got a jog"—Nancy was watching the averted face—"after that fool party of mine, the following February I think it was, Joan bolted."

"Bolted?" Grey turned startled eyes on Nancy.

"Yes. It was awfully upsetting. Mrs. Henley went to Europe—took the world in at one gulp that time—but Joan refused to go with her."

"Where did she go?"

"Up in Maine on a God-forsaken farm. 'Way up in the woods and it was winter, too. Some old retainer of

Mrs. Henley's lives there, and Joan departed, leaving no tracks. She buried herself up there and got redeemed! She's told me about it since. She got 'near to nature,' whatever that means; learned to milk cows and juggle with hens in their hungry moods; slept with an east window open, and gorged herself with sunrises and sunsets. You should hear her babble of open spaces and silent nights."

"I'd love to!" Norman was hardly aware of Nancy's presence. She was watching him closely as she went on:

"She sounds like a Christmas carol. All the same, her self-imposed exile apparently squared her with that Something in her which I mentioned earlier. Norman!"

Grey fairly jumped in his chair and turned a white face to Nancy. "Did—you speak?" he asked confusedly.

"Did I speak? I've been orating for a half hour. Norman—you needn't answer if you don't want to—but did you ever care, really care, for Joan?"

"Yes."

"And she?"

"She turned me down—flat."

Why this statement should cause Nancy to draw a deep breath of relief she could hardly have told, but she said, speaking more to herself than to Gray, "Well, Joan put an amazingly theatrical glamour around her transition stage. She eluded us like a bad little naughty runaway girl and came back a fully-grown woman and an all-around good sport."

Grey was not heeding Nancy, he was weighing words, trying to estimate how many he could dole out to Nancy and still remain self-respecting—not a cad. "You see, Nan, Joan might have cared—in a way, she did care a

little. I know that, until, she found out that I was going away under, well, you know, perhaps, a cloud?"

Nancy nodded and resorted to the touch on the arm.

"Well, Joan cared a lot more about that than anything else. I suppose it was that something in her that you've been talking about that snatched her back. She thought I was a rotter for taking a one last kick at your party while that cloud hung over me. That seemed to hit her between the eyes. I—I wanted her to go to South America with me but"—Grey gave a mirthless laugh—"she refused my kind offer without thanks. Of course, she didn't really care for me or she might have run the risk. I was a big risk. I've proved that, but that Joan should have understood so well and that she should have had such long-range vision, that got me!"

Nancy was bewildered. Had Joan cared? Had she gone away to—sulk? Had she been so humiliated that she wanted time for pulling herself together?

"And of course," Grey was saying, "I don't suppose I really cared for Joan in the big, honest way or I couldn't have——" He paused.

"Married as you did?" The words were out before Nancy realized their effect upon Grey.

He flushed, drew himself up, then muttered: "Exactly, but let us cut that out."

"Forgive me, Norman."

"That's all right, Nan. You understand?"

"Surely. I was a beast."

Mrs. Grey appeared at the door—she was actually playful. Everything seemed so happy, so blessed, so like the best of the old times. "Still talking of beasts? Do come in to supper. Father has the candles lighted, all

the old silver out, and he's opened eleven jars of jam. My, Nancy, how good it is to have you here!" She bent and kissed Nancy.

Grey walked home with Nancy that evening. It was a still, warm night, dark, but starry. "Just drop in at my office any time, Norman," Nancy said at parting. "Joan and I have a little sign we keep privately, but hang out occasionally, 'We mend everything.' Catch on?"

"Thanks, Nan."

"And I'm coming to your Sunday night suppers whenever I can—they're better than any church service."

"Thanks again, Nan."

After leaving Nancy, Norman walked around and around Gramercy Park. It was good just to be that near to something sweet and fine and dependable like Nancy Holt. When he reached his little apartment, thinking that Laurine was asleep in the bedroom, he took off his shoes and coat and prepared to lie down on the couch in the living room. He was taking off his tie when Laurine spoke from the darkened bedchamber beyond.

"Say, Normie, you certainly did give me the straight cut to-night."

Grimly Grey turned on the light and faced the inevitable.

"I went to dinner and a show." Laurine talked on from the shadow. She could see Grey's face as he stood in the doorway, the light streaming over him.

"I hope you enjoyed them." The words sounded lifeless but Grey had to say something.

"Both were rotten. I cut the show short and tried a walk. I passed your daddy's house just as you came out with a real lady in tow."

Grey shuddered but made no reply. He occupied himself in loosening his collar.

"I thought I might call on the family and walk home with you—but you upset my plans." A pause. Then: "You hear me, Normie?" For Grey had turned away.

"Oh, yes. I hear you."

"Was that one of the old crowd you used to tell me about when you wasn't as indifferent to me as you are now?"

Norman was silent, remembering how he had played up to Laurine at a critical moment, admitting her to his past as evidence of confidence in her.

"The crowd that let itself down because it had props to depend on—eh? Girls like me, without props, had to stand on their own or get trampled, eh? You were mighty understanding in those days, Normie. Well, dear, I never *did* get trampled and I'm not going to get trampled now. See? I've accumulated props and I'm going to use them. It's props against props, my dear, and I rather think mine will hold.

"Is that the one that staged that mountain spree?"

Grey came close to the bed at this—collarless, coatless, but with a strange dignity. "Now see here, Laurine," he said impressively, "if it does you any good to know, I'll tell you something. Your damned props are going to hold all right and for one good reason only—my people! Take that in. I'm not going to hurt them any more than I have hurt them already. Understand?"

Laurine yawned. "Yes, I catch on," she said, still pleasantly. "They're my best seasoned props. I realize that. I only wanted to come to some understanding."

"Well, have you—arrived?"

"Sure. Come to bed, Normie—you look a sight standing there half on, half off." Laurine laughed and settled herself on her pillows.

It was two weeks later that Grey went to Nancy's offices. His own day's work was done and so was hers, but she was lingering over private matters and quite alone. "Sit down, Norman," she said, "it's queer but I'm just reading a letter from Joan. Haven't had time before." A pause, then: "Roland is coming to take me out to dinner. Dinners are the ties that bind Ted and me. We'll all go out together to-night and have a real party."

Grey's eyes brightened. "Do you think I should?" he hesitated.

"Of course. There was never a better chaperon than Ted. Here! Read Joan's letter while I powder my nose. I've just glanced at it—the letter, I mean."

Nancy moved about the room and Grey was soon absorbed in the letter. It was gossipy, full of business, touched here and there by vivid descriptions of places or some dramatic scene—very little about Joan herself.

Nancy stood at her west window watching the effect of curling smoke and steam against a bronze-colored sky. She almost forgot Norman—she was thinking of Deep Woods. She was going at the week's end to the Adirondacks. It was heartening to feel that Patricia

Henley would be there to meet her—Patricia had learned to drive a car. How fine it would be if Grey could go along with her—he looked as if a vacation would do him good. Roland might go, too, under such circumstances. Ted had been held strictly to business lines lately. These thoughts so absorbed Nancy that when she turned and saw Grey's tense face and the crumpled letter on the table she plunged rather wildly. Norman looked so completely worn to the edge, so helpless and hungry. Yes, that was it—hungry! Seeing all this, Nancy flung caution to the winds.

"See here, Norman," she blurted, coming close to him and looking him squarely in the eyes. "I'm going to say something to you that you may resent, but you cannot order me from my own office. You may go out and make me feel like a fool—but here goes! Laurine isn't going to last forever. You know that as well as I do. Her kind never does last. Well—what then? Are you going to let her smash you before she goes? There are several people who care for you, Norman, your break-up would hurt them cruelly. Laurine isn't big enough to finish you unless you fall down. Why don't you make your big fight right now and here among your friends? You and Bob Martin are getting on my nerves. I cannot bear to see such women as Laurine and Corlyss get away with it. It's like watching children set fire to something valuable or fooling around with a bomb, and not *do* anything about it."

Nancy had talked herself into self-consciousness; Grey's silence, his white drawn face frightened her. "Do say something, Norman." She flushed and moved away. "Have I made myself too grossly plain? If so—forget

it! See here, come up to Deep Woods with me this week-end; there's balm in other places besides Gilead." Nancy laughed nervously.

Then Grey, drawing a deep breath, looked up. "You've made things damned plain, Nan, and I thank you. I'm doing the best I can. You're not all right about Laurine and me. She's not as bad as you imagine and I'm afraid I'm not as decent as you fancy. Thanks awfully about Deep Woods—but I couldn't go there—not now."

"Will you come to dinner with Ted and me to-night?" Nancy felt as if her ears had been boxed.

"Yes, I'll be glad to."

"And you will—keep on fighting?"

Grey laughed.

"There's always one fight, at least, in us, Norman." A mist rose between Grey and Nancy. "One big fight. We either go under or get on top. I know what I'm talking about."

Roland came in just then. He seemed to reduce everything to normal by merely coming in. "I've discovered a new place to eat," he said breezily, and shook Grey's hand.

"Cool?" Nancy asked, pushing things into drawers and then going to her closet for hat and gloves.

"There are fans."

"I'm not putting my faith in fans to-night. My car isn't far from here; the seat's big enough for us three, if we squeeze in. I know a place down on Long Island that doesn't have to resort to fans. Us for that!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE elder Greys remained in town for most of the summer. They had not the heart to leave their son fighting his battle alone. The occasional week-day calls, the Sunday evening suppers meant so much to them and to him. Outside of these meetings Grey's people, apparently, took no part in his life. They never saw Laurine, but they always politely asked about her.

Laurine was fuming and pulling hard against restraint. The heat made her half ill, but she dared not go too far. She worked off her discomfort upon Norman whenever they were alone, and Norman, in his poor, shambling way, was putting up the best fight that was in him. He kept silent for the most part, and worked away at the office.

Joan wrote, late in August, an amazing letter. Nancy and Patricia read it before a blazing log fire at the lodge. A cold spell had descended upon Deep Woods, a hint of frost was in the air—the trees stood motionless, waiting!

I hope [Joan wrote] that this will find you both in the woods. Whenever I've dared let myself down to think of you I've pictured you there. How wonderful it has all been, and it has made it possible for me to snoop and haggle without a tug at my heart about Grandy.

Then followed several sheets of items. Rugs, tapestries, jewelry—"Heavens! what a list," Nancy laughed.

Then: "Listen to this, Aunt Pat"—Patricia had become that to Nancy.

"I've started the whole mess to America. It should be there before long. A lot of it will be duty-less, regular antiques, Nan, but *how* I have demeaned myself making the dealers understand that *I* understand. However, all the agony is over and when you see the riches of the Orient that I have corralled, when you read the docked prices, you will forgive the thing I am about to do. Namely, take a vacation. A real one. I do not think I've ever had one!

"I like that!" Nancy interjected.
"So do I!" Patricia made a wry face.
"Well—listen to *this*, Aunt Pat:

"A real vacation is one unplanned, a letting go and just reaching out day by day and taking what the gods provide. You'll laugh when I tell you where I am going. Such a prosaic place when all the hidden corners of the earth are at my command. I'm going to the south of England. I'm going to take a boat from France that stops at Plymouth to pick up stragglers. I have the most unaccountable pull toward the moors and the Cornish coast. If I were superstitious—I'm not, but if I were—I'd say that something is about to happen 'long o' me. The worst that will probably happen is that—I'm letting go. I'm tired and I've leaped at the first place that came into my mind. But even this place occurred to me naturally. I was rereading Mr. Galsworthy's play, 'Escape'—remember, Nan, how we discussed that? You said you would have given the criminal up. *Much* you would! I said I'd be too frightened to do anything and you laughed at that. Anyway, I'm going to see if there are any such fogs as Galsworthy describes or whether he availed himself of dramatic license.

"Send letters, anything, care of American Express, London. I'll get in touch with them at once."

Patricia and Nancy looked at each other. "Now what do you make of that?" asked Nancy. To which Patricia replied cryptically:

"When Joan acted like this long ago her nurse and I were on guard. We put things out of reach!"

"We're helpless." Nancy gave a laugh. "In that case, I suppose we'll have to wait and see what happens."

"Yes, and be ready to bail her out. Joan certainly has learned to kick her heels."

New York was blistering hot, and Laurine fretted and fumed on. Once only she went to the Greys' for Sunday night supper, but Nancy was not there and the dullness almost drove her to desperation. After that she concocted a new attack on Grey to test just how much, or how little, of a hold she had on him. She became gentle, suffering, and patient.

"The heat is killing me," she panted, and proceeded to fade away under Norman's eyes. She wore her daintiest negligees all day and almost fainted as she prepared his meals. Laurine's white face made him feel like a cur, but his own face was whitening and shrinking and presently John Grey took heed of his son and had an interview with the president of the bank in which Norman was undoubtedly making good. As John Grey was a director of this bank, his suggestions were taken into account. Eventually a business trip was planned. Norman was to travel through the Eastern states, looking over the bank's interests there, making reports, and if he proved a success in this capacity his future would largely be spent in travel.

When Norman was told of this his spirits rose; then fell. Honorable escape was barred by a memory of Laurine's white face and gentler manners. He decided, if it could be arranged, to take Laurine with him, but

before he mentioned this to his father he consulted Laurine.

"I can take you along," he said. "We'll have to go cheap. The bank pays my expenses, but I'd have to pay yours."

"Going to—big towns?"

"I will touch a few for a day or so; most of our contacts are with small concerns in little towns."

"Trying to ward me off, Normie?"

"No, merely stating facts."

"I suppose it will mean traveling in day coaches, spending nights in stuffy hotels, a one-room engagement, mosquitoes, poor food and—slow death."

"Well—something like that from your point of view," Norman admitted. "I'll be busy and it means a lot to me that my people trust me."

"Trust you!" Laurine laughed scornfully. "Trust you to run errands where important men wouldn't go. You're easily flattered, Normie."

"Well, will you come along?" Grey took no notice of the jeering words.

"No, I won't, thanks. How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know—I go with the understanding that I may be sent further——"

"Normie, are you lying to me?"

"It's easy enough for you to verify what I say, Laurine, if you care to."

"Thanks—I'm not going into the sleuth business *just yet*. Say, Normie, don't you have any qualms about leaving me here alone?"

"None, Laurine."

"Is that an insult or a compliment?"

"I have no desire to insult you."

"And certainly not to compliment me. Oh! Normie, I seem to have lost my sex appeal—where *you* are concerned."

Still Grey showed no interest.

"Lord!" Laurine burst forth, "how I'd like to blow you and your nice papa and mamma up—just to see where you'd land when you came down."

"We're not very combustible," Norman said, and turned away.

After that Laurine assumed a distant and relentless manner. When she was obliged to speak she did so guardedly; so near was she to the breaking point that she dared not trust herself. And from this atmosphere Grey departed late in July for New England. He felt that he had done all that he decently could and, once free of the depressing environment of his home, actually reacted in a most amazing way. He ate simple, well-cooked food with relish, he slept in quiet rooms and *rested*. His mind cleared, and he began to enjoy his work.

John Grey and his wife, once their son was safely off the scene, started for their country house on the Hudson.

Nancy came into town to receive the goods Joan had sent; the heat depressed her; her ideals tottered.

"Ted," she said to Roland one day, "I believe you and I are the only ones in New York. Don't you feel lonely?"

"Less so than I have felt for several days," Roland replied cheerfully. In shirt sleeves and perspiring profusely, he was helping Nancy unpack a large box.

Nancy, her hair curling, her face soiled and damp, paused to look at him. "Something saves you from being slavish, Ted—what is it?"

"Perhaps because I'm *not* a slave, Nan."

"Why don't you—drop off, Ted? I hate to seem to use you."

"Where shall I put these statuettes?" Roland asked, and scowled.

"Put them—anywhere, Ted! Well—I've warned you and left it to you."

Roland jammed the works of art in a corner and muttered a "damn." Then, rising and looking determined, he said: "See here, wash your face and comb your hair—it looks about a foot thick. I'm tired of this. We're going down on Long Island for dinner to that place we took Grey."

"Are we?" Nancy oozed complacency. "Ted, at last I know the bliss of the bossed woman. I know I'm juggling, but it's too hot to be moral. By the way, what do you know about Norman?"

"Nothing much. His people have sent him off on a business trip."

"The lovely Laurine with him?"

"No, she's bumming around town. Bumming seems to apply to her."

"It does, doesn't it? I'm ready, Sheik Roland."

And it was at this time, while Norman Grey was in Portland, Maine, that a curious chain of incidents occurred that go far to make people believe that patterns are, for the most part, designed, and merely handed to us to work out intelligently or fumblingly as the case may be. While eating breakfast one morning, Norman

seemed to realize for the first time that he *was* in Maine. His notebook, his railroad tickets and hotel engagements might have impressed the fact upon him, but suddenly the knowledge that he was in Maine took on ridiculous importance. Why was Maine any different from Vermont or Massachusetts, or, for that matter, Connecticut or New Hampshire? It was amusing. All day, when he was not absorbed in business, Grey had that amusing consciousness of being in Maine! Presently his subconscious thought began to form and rise to the surface in a more definite manner.

Joan had been in Maine that time when, according to Nancy, she had run away. Then like items on a list, memory brought forth in orderly array other things Nancy had said. Lonely farm. Dependent of Patricia Henley's.

With nothing better to do in his free hours Grey decided to look up the owners of lonely farms in the north of Maine. It would be rather entertaining and there could not be many. Perhaps Patricia Henley's name might be known if the land had been bought by, and held for, her. It would be something to do. He would like to see the place where Joan had gone and remained during that unaccounted-for time. Fancy Joan doing such a thing! Nancy might have done it—such tricks were quite along her line—but Joan!

Suddenly Grey's health began to weaken, his nights were sleepless. He seemed to be kept awake by something. It wasn't business; that was going well. The days were comparatively easy. It was the nights that became unbearable. Grey almost resorted to drink—but he still had enough strength to battle that temptation down.

If only there were someone to talk to, someone to travel about with and see the sights. But everyone appeared to have boon companions, or made it evident that no contacts were desired. Norman had formed the habit of going every evening to the post office. A letter was some excitement and, in a little alcove off the main room, he wrote his few letters—it was less lonely than the bustling little hotel. So night after night, until closing time, Grey hung about the post office.

One day, apropos of nothing, but making it an excuse for speaking to someone, Grey asked the postmaster if there were many farms in the vicinity owned by women.

The man looked at him keenly. "Now that question," he drawled, "is either an iser or an ain'ter. A blamed senseless question or—a feeler. Thinking about investin'?"

Grey, upon the spur of the moment, replied that he might buy some wood land, if anything tempted him.

"Well, sir, there are a good many farms owned and run by women round about"—the postmaster saw a possible chance to turn a dollar or so—"and let me tell you they're as well run as if a man run 'em, and as for wisdom teeth the Maine women had all that was coming to them in the teeth line—natural or artificial"—this facetiously, for Grey had become worth pleasing.

"Well, if you hear of any good bargain let me know," Norman said, and felt rather proud of himself. He had started something. Scarcely a day passed without someone nibbling at the bait he had thrown out. Grey found himself an object of interest, for, by the wireless method of isolated sections, the word passed along. "Are you

the man who is sizing up farms?" he was often asked, or, "Maybe you'd like to drive up to Widder Towne's place? She's got some farm land cheap."

And then quite by accident—if there is any such thing as accident—Margot Fleming came directly across Grey's path as if, by appointment, she had kept a carefully arranged meeting. Grey was standing by the door of the post office when a Ford car rolled up and a plain, competent-looking woman jumped out and turned to reassure a little child in the seat.

"Just you keep your eye on the wheel, lass, I'll be back at once."

And then from a man pausing on the sidewalk came this startling question: "Say, Miss Fleming, isn't there some land on that farm you're living on, as the owner might care to sell? Seems like I recall a time back as you said she might let some go. Here's a gentleman looking about for a deal."

Margot came closer and looked at Grey. "I don't know," she said slowly, "it might be considered." Patricia Henley had once said that there was too much useless land to look after. "I don't know," she repeated. Then: "If you don't mind the heat you might ride back with me and take a look at the property. I could drive you down later."

"Thank you, I will." Grey moved toward the car.

"Go right along," Margot called after him. "Bethan ain't shy."

Then, to the child: "Be nice to the gentleman, lass, I'll be right there."

Grey did not then, nor ever after, seek to understand what happened to him as he sat down beside the child

in the car. A faint weakness overpowered him. "The heat!" He grappled with that most reasonable explanation, but it brought no relief.

Bethan was looking at him as she edged toward the steering wheel. There was no fear in her eyes, but there was wonder, interest, and on that little face a Great Master, with unerring touch, had reproduced the face of the mother Bethan had never known. Eyes, coloring, even the nervous twitch of the upper lip—so like a fleeting smile. As sure as he was ever to know, Norman Grey knew at that moment that he was looking at Joan's child—and his! He closed his eyes and sought to batter down the truth with all the common sense at his command. "Such things could not happen! No one would dare——" Then that talk with Nancy recurred to him. He remembered every word.

Margot came back and took her seat at the wheel. Bethan, who had not uttered a sound, was wedged between Grey and Margot; occasionally she turned and looked at Grey. Once she smiled a sweet, friendly smile, and again a kind of blindness made him physically ill. Then, to his surprise, he felt as if he had, all along, been preparing for this. It was like coming to something he had always known existed. It was only the suddenness of discovery that had unnerved him.

"There's good water on the hill," Margot was saying, "and big trees. I'm not sure that the owner of the place would care to sell, but I will write and ask her. It's no harm to look around."

With this Grey seemed content. He was not listening. He was recalling again what Nancy had said, item by item. Again the dizziness and blur.

"It's valuable land and I'm not keen about having trees felled. Still——"

"We might leave the trees," Grey said slowly. He had to say something. What he was thinking was: "I'm sick—delirious, perhaps. This is madness. What have I got to go on?" He ventured a glance at the child. The little puzzled face was still turned toward him. He closed his eyes again.

They reached the farm in due time; Margot was a fast driver and the roads were good. "I'll put the child on a blanket under the trees," Margot said. "She'll fall asleep."

"You—leave her alone?" Again something must be said.

"She's used to that and she loves it—going to sleep under the trees."

Bethan helped to place the blanket when Margot brought it; babbling and smiling, she was trying to prove her efficiency to this strange man.

Somehow Grey later made the hill across the meadow, he heard some things Margot said, and he tried to answer intelligently while all the time his tortured brain was fighting against a growing fear that was too tangible for common sense to overcome or even weaken. At one moment he all but asked the woman beside him what he wanted to know! Instead, he must have mentioned an absurd price he was willing to give for the land.

"It's worth double," Margot replied, and the words held contempt.

"Perhaps—" Grey tried to talk calmly—"perhaps you'll let me come up again? After all, I'm green at this game. Ignorant as to prices, you know."

It resulted in Grey coming three times to the farm. He aroused slumbering fears in Margot's mind, but he gained Bethan's confidence. Margot, on the last visit, said that the matter had better wait until they both had something definite to work on. "I'll write to-night," she said.

Grey agreed to this. He was watching Bethan.

Then Margot made a fatal slip. "I'll ask Mrs. Henley to telegraph." Then: "What's the matter, young man?" for Grey had turned white.

"Dizzy—the heat," he faltered. "Could I have a glass of water?"

Margot hastened to fetch it, and by the time she returned Grey had somewhat revived. "I have a bad heart," he explained, and Margot's trained sense knew that this was so—her own uneasiness lessened.

"You'd best look after yourself," she cautioned.

"I'm leaving almost at once for New York. I'll see my doctor there."

When Grey reached his little hotel he went to bed and tried to sleep. After all, he might as well sleep. The verdict had been given. No more doubt—he was sentenced; what was there to do but sleep? But sleep refused to come. "What could be done about it?" Along that line Grey plunged, falling now and then over some stubborn doubt that somehow could not bear the weight of what he knew to be true.

"They would not dare to do such a thing," Grey tried to reason, "in time it would be bound to come out." Perhaps it was known! How did he know that it was not? What did he know, anyway, about anything? The answer to all this was little Bethan's face!

"I'm sick, on the verge of delirium." This fear brought relief, in a way. The business was finished. He was only putting off his return for two reasons: he had never wanted to go back, and lately he had been compelled to know more. Well, what did he know?

What *was* he going to do about it? There was Laurine. He could not discount Laurine, she stood like a rock between him and any sane or desperate thing he might be tempted to do. Did Joan—know? Of course she knew! Hidden things like that belonged to a past age, of course Joan knew. But Patricia Henley *was* of a past age! Pro and con fears battled in Grey's brain. Was it possible that Patricia Henley had been able to deceive Joan? She would be capable of it in the name of Right, too, but could she? Of course not. No! such a melodramatic idea was all bosh. Of course Joan knew, or else the whole thing was delirium. Lord! I wish I could see Joan. I could tell, if only I could see her."

And in that moment Grey was torn between two questions: "Would he rather know that Joan did know?" or "Would he thank God that she did not?" If the impossible could be proven a fact? Then a new terror seized upon Grey. What a fool he had been. Margot Fleming would undoubtedly write to Patricia Henley if she had not already done so! He had endangered everything and he must stand aside unable to do anything but watch the fire he had kindled. Suddenly a wan hope sent him to the telephone. He called the farm and Margot promptly answered.

"It's about the deal," Grey stammered, "have you written yet?"

"No, I'm planning to do it now."

"Well, I'm afraid the thing's off"—Grey shook as he stood at the telephone, which was placed high against his room wall—"I'm getting away at once, too sick to do any business. Sorry!"

"That's all right"—Margot, at her end of the line, turned her eyes on Bethan waiting for her delayed supper—"I don't think we'd have sold, anyway. I hope you'll look after yourself, young man."

The relief Grey felt was only temporary. After all, Margot Fleming had his name, in time she would tell Patricia Henley—the game was up! But Grey was not taking into consideration Margot's reasons for *not* explaining matters to Patricia Henley.

Like a dog prowling near its hidden bone, Margot, as the days passed—waited. If any danger threatened she was ready, but so long as the bone could lie undisturbed—lie it should! Letters came from the Adirondack camp—no suggestion of danger! The checks came—still no indication of any change. Margot drew a long breath and took Bethan to the open spaces and knew peace once more.

Grey went back to New York and found conditions there so turbulent that his private troubles sank heavily into the background. Laurine was rampant. Her summer had been devastating. She had not been able to make an impression anywhere. She had been forced to acknowledge that even should she decide to "shunt," as she graphically put it, "the whole Grey outfit," she still would be in a desperate position. Her lure for men—any kind, and she had done some testing—was on the wane. Men regarded her wiles, looked canny and veered off! There was no doubt as to the veering.

Managers—and she had gone to several—coldly, calculatingly eyed her, hinted at dieting, the brutes!—and took her name in case anything should turn up.

Unhappy and frightened, Laurine had gone so far as to call at the Grey house; she planned a penitent attack on the old people in Norman's presence. The house was closed. And then when Norman returned, unexpectedly, she experienced a sense of relief. At least her rejected charms, burnished and regulated, might gain something for her. At least they could depend upon the legal tie, that hold of the good and the bad woman!

Grey sought to reassure Laurine about his salary—she had pounced upon the fact that there had been no increase. "That will come later," Norman said.

"You always get the dirty end of the stick," Laurine flung out at him, relying upon the legality of her position. "I begin to see," she said, "that it is likely to be up to me to get out of this rut. Your people are too darned mean to come to the fore, and I've been too soft with them. They ought to give us more. When they are dead we'll get it anyway. We've got to have more money. I'm not going to swelter in these rooms any longer—not while I have legs."

Grey, on edge anyway, retorted angrily, "Meaning exactly what, by that?"

"Exactly this. Either you get money from some quarter or I go on the stage again. I'd have to begin where I could, here in New York, but my name and background, at least *your* name and background, ought to count. I mean to get something out of all this mess and I tell you that plain and straight."

Grey looked ugly. "I've had about enough of this,"

he retorted desperately, "and now *you* get something plain and straight. I've done the best that I could with this mess, as you call it. You may not think I have, but I know. I'm not going to stand by and see you fling mud at my people, Laurine, and that seems to be what you're suggesting."

"How can you help it, Normie? I haven't given *'cause'* you know." She laughed coarsely. "I'm smart enough to keep out of that trap. Not having a nice lot of inherited props to fall back on I've found out that virtue is its own reward. It got *you* for me, Normie, don't forget that, and it's going to keep you for me as long as I need you, see?"

Grey did see. "All right," he said quietly, "the day you kick the traces, virtue or no virtue, I go to my people and stand pat with them."

"I reckon there are some laws in this damned country of yours, Normie, that deal with tricks of that kind, eh?"

"Maybe, but you'd have to pay for the use of them, my dear, and believe *me* they come high. Devilish high." And with that Grey went out.

He stopped at Nancy's offices only to learn that she was still at her camp.

CHAPTER XIV

It was a week later that Nancy and Patricia Henley returned to New York.

The Greys had also returned, and Norman spent most of his free hours with his parents. Laurine was rarely in the flat, and Grey did not question her as to her absences. He slept on the couch in the stuffy little living room; he attended stricly to business and got some pleasure out of the fact that he was being appreciated, though hours of black misery often clouded everything else. And then, quite suddenly, he decided to call upon Patricia Henley. He could bear his doubts no longer.

Patricia had been almost happy at the lodge. Joan's absence, Nancy's humor and attention, had done much to restore her to the state of mind from which she could contemplate life with courage. Things had quieted down and assumed a stable appearance. After all, she had done wisely and well, Patricia thought.

There was a letter from Margot awaiting Patricia, but she took it up with no anticipation of anything more annoying than an itemized account of money spent and a perfunctory statement as to Bethan's general condition. But Margot had written a very different letter.

After Grey's telephone call and departure suppressed doubts rose to the surface and gained power over her as the lonely days passed. "That man had no idea of

buying land," she decided. What, then? Perhaps he had discovered what he came to discover. Perhaps he was already endangering them all. It would do no harm to write a guarded letter to Patricia Henley. A word in time might prevent trouble, and at the least Patricia would know all there was to know. This knowledge might, with care, be so skillfully imparted that if nothing were wrong Patricia need have no worry. On the surface, the whole thing seemed innocent enough.

So Margot had sent to Mrs. Henley what she considered a masterpiece. She told of the fiasco concerning the property business. Naturally enough she might have forgotten the name of the man, so Margot did not mention Grey's name. She dealt largely with the question of whether or not Patricia cared to sell any of the land, for evidently there was a stir in the market.

The letter had a devastating effect upon Patricia. She knew about Norman Grey's trip to the Eastern states —she and Nancy had discussed that with interest. In it lay hopes of Grey's future; they were glad about it. Instantly upon reading Margot's letter Norman Grey was definitely linked to the fear that always lay ready to spring in Patricia's mind. She did not pause to consider the unlikelihood of Grey's suspecting anything. She *knew* that in some way he had found out and was only biding his time to make—well, what could he make? Certainly he could make no demands. At that moment Laurine took on importance. She stood like a rock of safety. Grey could not discount Laurine.

Then Patricia took another course and considered anticipating Grey if he had any idea of benefiting by what he had discovered. This was unworthy of Patricia

Henley and she knew it, but she knew also that the Greys had taken a positive stand where Laurine was concerned, for Nancy had told of the strain the wife was upon all of them. "After all, I may prevent trouble, not increase it, by taking this method," thought Patricia, while never doubting that Norman knew everything.

So Patricia waited for the first advance with every nerve tense. She considered, pro and con, just what Grey might do unless she could divert his course before he undertook it. Tell Joan? That would defeat everything, but he would be involved, too. What would be Joan's attitude? Before this Patricia bowed her head. With every dollar at her command, with all the persuasion of which she was capable, she must protect Joan, but if she failed—well, the end had come!

So it was that Patricia waited, and as the days passed she began to wish for Grey's call, to know the worst, to be able to get into action no matter what the result was to be.

And then Grey's card was brought up to her one day. Patricia drew herself up and looked in the long mirror. She strove for her most imposing manner; she smoothed her lovely hair and even practiced a smile. She would begin with the smile. A touch of rouge helped a little —just a touch. The smile became fixed, but not too fixed—and Patricia went downstairs.

She was shocked at Grey's appearance. "He looks," she thought, "like a glossed-over bounder"—but she held her hand out to him and motioned him to a comfortable chair. She was wary, but Grey was so obviously ill at ease that she gradually got control of her own

fears and felt more as if she might command the situation if she went slow. After all, what could Grey do except sell himself? As that thought reared in Patricia's mind it brought a flush to her cheek and a sense of power.

"You timed your call well," she said, settling herself comfortably. "I only came down from camp recently. You have been in no hurry, though, to look up old friends—some old friends, at least. I've heard from others that you—you and your wife have been here for some time."

Patricia found relief in words, and Grey listened, awkwardly shifting in his chair. Since Grey did not speak, Patricia asked rather sharply, for she wanted to bring things to a crisis, "Where have you been keeping yourself?"

Then Norman Grey fired his shot so straight and true that it dislodged Patricia from any stronghold she had taken; it left her helpless and adrift.

"I've been up in Maine; that's why I am here. There are some things I want to have cleared up."

Had Grey been less direct, less simple, Patricia might have sparred and gained time, but the words confirmed but one thing to her mind. Grey did know—everything! Everything. She felt as a criminal might when the hand of the law was on his shoulder. She lost her balance and took to open confession with desperate haste; she outran caution; tripped over words; took no heed of Grey's astonishment.

"Well—what are you going to do about it? At the time it seemed the only possible thing to do. Joan believe the child dead. You have it in your power to run

us all, but I hardly see what you will personally gain by such a course."

Grey stared at her blankly, and in a moment Patricia saw her blunder; but it was too late now for recovery. She had squandered everything in her fright.

"I—I wasn't sure," Grey muttered at last, "it seemed too unlikely. There is a startling resemblance, the age —and Nancy had said something about Joan going to Maine—— Good Lord! Mrs. Henley, is there anything in the world I *can* do?"

Patricia struggled to regain some kind of stable position, Grey's grief-stricken face reassured her. She might still get control, make terms, if only she did not break through again. She felt old and stricken. She had failed herself; she hardly dared to take any step now, but it was worse to stand still.

Grey helped her at last by asking: "Will you tell me—all there is to be told, Mrs. Henley? I think I have the right to that. Of course you must know what a surprise and shock this is to me and, believe me, at any time that Joan had wanted—— Mrs. Henley, I loved Joan and I wanted to marry her. Not for anything she believed, but because I loved her!" The words and tone were sincere and convincing. Grey's thin, twitching face supported his words.

Patricia saw her chance. Here was her opening, but she felt almost ill. "Very well. I'll tell you all there is to be told. Yes, I think you have that right." The words came haltingly, each one considered. Grey listened, his bewildered eyes fixed upon Patricia's face to the end.

Then Patricia startled him into speech by blurting

out: "Well, Norman, now that you know everything, what are your plans?"

"Plans?" Norman stuttered over the word. "Plans? Good Lord, Mrs. Henley, plans?"

Seeing his utter abasement, Patricia clutched at the tatters of her all but dead hopes and grew—kind. "Then why have you come?" she asked.

"I had to be—sure."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I could not rest until I was sure. Lord! Mrs. Henley, can't you understand?"

Patricia grew kinder. "Joan had to be saved," she said slowly. "She refused to—to marry you; she told me everything. She gave you credit for—for your willingness to do your part, but she refused your assistance. I saw only one way to save her from her folly. I firmly believed at the time of its birth—that the baby was dead, Norman. You believe that?"

Grey nodded.

"It was only after I had told Joan it was dead that I discovered——" Patricia caught her breath sharply; she was all but spent but she must hold to what she had gained. "It was a miracle—the bringing of the child to life. At the moment I could not think clearly but I had to act. The child has the best of care——"

Grey raised his troubled eyes. "Yes, I guess that is so," he faltered.

"It shall always have the best of care," Patricia went on. Then: "Norman, what could be gained by bringing the past to—to life?"

"Nothing," Grey muttered miserably, "nothing, Mrs. Henley, but all the same it's damned wrong!"

"I grant that." Patricia knew her time had come to make a definite move if the future were to be made safe. "Young people should think about all this when they take for granted that they own the world." She ventured cautiously forward; she was none too sure of herself or Grey. "Joan felt that she could control everything—but she could not. I had to help her as best I could. I am prepared to bear the burden she——"

"And I, Mrs. Henley!"

"Yes, she and you placed upon me, Norman. I will do my best always. I wish that you might believe this."

"I do believe you, Mrs. Henley. All the same, I repeat, it's damned wrong and yet I cannot see any other way."

"Exactly!" Patricia took a step further. "I realize, Norman, that you have it in your power now, you always will have it in your power to bring deep disgrace upon us, but I really cannot see what you would have to gain by such a course——"

"Please, please, Mrs. Henley, you quite misunderstand if you think I came here—— Good Lord! I'm no blackmailer, if that is what is in your mind!" A pitiful dignity rang in Grey's voice. His face flushed, his drooping shoulders straightened.

Patricia had the grace to fall back and say: "You misunderstand *me*."

Patricia felt a strange sensation of relief. After all the time of fear and anxiety here was someone to whom she could talk openly, someone who, in a way, was a sharer of the secret that had eaten deep into her nature. He was not going to harm her. He might even become —a comfort. Grey was no scoundrel who meant to use

her for his own ends. She wanted, suddenly, above all else to help him.

"Forgive me!" she said softly, and really meant what she said. Then: "You do not know what I have endured, must endure."

"I can imagine it, Mrs. Henley."

"Not fully unless you could see Joan as she is to-day. The experience developed, ennobled her. I am—terribly afraid of her."

"I'm deeply sorry, Mrs. Henley. I see that in coming here I have made things worse. But—I had to come!" He looked so broken, sick, and beaten that again Patricia was swept by pity. "If I could," Grey muttered, "I would take the support of the child off your hands, but I'm strapped!"

"Oh! not that, not that!" Patricia burst in. "My only peace of mind is grounded on what I can do for the child."

"I see. She's a beautiful little thing, Mrs. Henley" —Grey's face quivered—"like—Joan."

Patricia raised her hands as if warding off something tangible. "Don't! I know. Sometimes I feel as if I were —putting Joan away. Joan!"

"And the future." Norman's mind was in a chaotic state.

Again the warding hands. "Don't! don't!" pleaded Patricia.

There was an awkward silence, then Norman rose. "Well—thank you!" he muttered. "I suppose there's nothing more to say."

"That's the pity of it all. There is nothing." Patricia held out her hand and added: "Come and see me when

you can, Norman. You and I have much in common."

After Grey left her Patricia went to her desk. She drew her check book to her and thought. Was it possible to make Grey understand the difference between a bribe and blood money? He was, as he had put it, "strapped." Could she loosen his bonds, leave him freer to avail himself of opportunities, legitimate ones? Was he capable of comprehending *her* desire to show her gratitude for his mercy to her?

Patricia wrote several letters and at last felt she had, at least, made herself clear. Then she drew a check for five thousand dollars.

"You may repay this if you feel you must; if, on the other hand, you can regard it as an investment you will earn my eternal gratitude."

In the same mail that carried Grey's letter and check went a letter and a check also to Margot.

"You should be too wise, Margot, to let any chance stranger take advantage of you," Patricia wrote. "You surprise me. I am enclosing a check, and you know, Margot, that if you have need of more money at any time you have only to ask for it, but I will not sell the land."

When Grey received Patricia's check his first impulse was to return it without a word. It was hush money! In his soul he believed that, and he cringed. Of course —he was not being bought; he had nothing to sell. What did Patricia Henley take him for? But while his better nature was in revolt, Laurine in wild disorder as to dress and temper was haranguing from the bedroom.

"I'm through," came the strident voice. "I've reached

my limit. It's the stage for me. I'm going to the agencies this morning. The straight and narrow way may be right enough if it leads to anywhere, but it's led me into a—a mouse trap. I'm through!"

"Meaning?" Norman had made himself a bad cup of coffee; he must hurry to the office. But he had learned the exact importance of Laurine's moods—this was a dangerous one; less so than he imagined, however.

Laurine came to the bedroom door. Without her make-up, with her loose, soiled negligee hanging from her thin shoulders, she looked common and old. "I mean just this. I saw an agent yesterday and he asked me how far I'd go—advertising, you know. I mean how far I'd let them spread the news about me, you and your elegant family and all that. I'm not depraved, Normie, you know that better than anyone else, but I'm desperate. I'm fed up on the dutiful daughter-in-law gag. You haven't stood by me; I'm not tagging on your tracks—I'm not that kind, but I'm not a fool, either. I know as well as I care to know where you spend your off times—but from now on it's even betting on you and me."

"You mean"—Grey pushed his cup from him—"that you'll let some dirty, lowdown theatrical agent air our private affairs; blazon my father's and mother's name for your advancement on some common vaudeville stage?"

Laurine pulled her negligee over her thin little bosom. "Something like that," she replied, and gave Grey a teasing smile.

He clutched the check in his hand. Five thousand dollars might buy Laurine off for a time; he would surely

get a raise in salary soon—at a pinch, later on, he could ask his father for a loan. Just a little time, time! "Laurine," he spoke gravely, "I hate to bargain with you, hate to put myself in that position with you, but I must spare my people if I can. I am getting on, making good, if you'll keep your hands off for a few months. See here, suppose I agree to take something a little better than this apartment. We might go to a family hotel for a year—that would leave you freer, give you a change. Laurine, I implore you——"

Laurine swaggered into the room, her mules flapping on the floor as she came along. "See here," she asked quietly, "are you keeping anything from me?"

At this Grey laughed—it wasn't a pleasant laugh.

"Let me see that check, Normie."

But Grey clutched it and put his hand behind him.

"You've got a raise?"

"Yes, I've got a raise."

"And you didn't intend to tell me?"

"You see I mean to spend it on you."

This gave Laurine something to consider. "Is it a big raise?"

"Big enough to make life easy for you—at least comparatively so."

"All right. We'll try a family hotel. We needn't sign a lease at some of them; I've been looking them up. Normie, how far can we go?"

"I'll have to figure that out. We'll go house hunting this afternoon." Grey drew a deeper breath—at least the worst was averted for the time being.

Laurine came close and sat on Grey's lap—she put

her arms about his neck, looked into his eyes. "Say, Normie, let's be friends."

"All right." But Grey's body was rigid.

"Normie, you—love me, don't you?"

"No!" Grey spoke defiantly.

"What?" Laurine bent backward, dragging Grey's head forward. "You—dare to tell me that, to my face?"

"Yes."

"Normie, are you crazy?"

"I—think not."

"It's your damned people who are at the bottom of this. Talk about in-laws! Mine are the last word of the brand."

Grey shook himself free. "What time will you be ready this afternoon?" he asked.

Laurine considered. "At four," she said at last, and there was a gleam in her eyes that Grey kept recalling all day.

And while all this was going on at home Joan, like a suddenly released burden bearer, was looking forward to what she termed her first real vacation, and was making her way toward the south of England. She was tired—at least she had believed herself tired until she set sail; then, to her surprise, she suddenly felt light as air and full of excited anticipation.

"I, who have browsed and bartered in Turkey and Africa, haggled and sworn in Italy, been as polite as possible in France, and tested my mettle in Germany—here I am as gay as a grig because I'm going to cuddle down in England and have a real vacation. Funny!"

It was interesting—this mood of Joan's. She had

spent many a month in England with Patricia, had roamed a whole summer in Scotland and Wales, had had weeks in Ireland, but a sense of adventure possessed her now. It was like going into a new country, mingling with new people.

The lovely harbor of Plymouth was smilingly blue and calm the morning of Joan's landing. As it was no particular tourist time she had not engaged a room and, leaving her luggage, three or four bags—her trunks were left in France—at the station she went to a hotel for luncheon and then walked about the town deciding where she wanted to settle for as long as her mood of adventure lasted.

Quite by chance she came, late in the afternoon, to the small, tidy house of Jane Jones; the alliteration caught her fancy. "And the imagination of Jane Jones!" Joan laughed, "to announce that lodgings are possible in this mite of a place."

The house was indeed small and tucked sidewise at the end of a little street as if, rather choked for air, it had turned its back on its neighbors and with shining little windows, like excited eyes, faced the moors several miles away. "I'll just see what Jane Jones calls lodgings," and Joan knocked at the door.

Hopefully, but with reserve, Jane Jones opened the door. Compact, competent, capable was Jane Jones. Her face was stern and alert, the face of a woman who knew her own weaknesses and had learned to control her impulses. Jane was a sentimentalist and waster by nature, but she had married a Welshman early in life —had lived among the miners in the grim mountains of Wales. There she had learned to convert as best she

could her sentimentality into practical sympathy and service, and to watch her few assets like a miser, in order to preserve her own self-respect and share intelligently with the less favored.

"Yes, I have rooms," Jane Jones told Joan.

"I would like to see them," said Joan.

The top floor of the small house comprised two rooms—a large living room, a tiny bedroom. Neatness and order prevailed and such peace as only a waiting room, that has known no discord, can suggest. Atmosphere of places always had an effect upon Joan. Standing on the threshold of the plain, sweet room she was conscious of lavender, the haunting breath of wide, flowery spaces—for the wind was coming over Dartmoor and bringing memories with it. Here was a spot that had never known unrest. The prim checked curtains at the low, broad windows puffed out like the skirts of tidy little girls. The bed in the room beyond looked alluring—it was covered by a beautiful patchwork quilt.

"Oh! I would like to have these rooms," Joan spoke impulsively.

Jane Jones was watching her. "They're a guinea a week, coal extra." Under the cool, clipping words there ran a warm, friendly note that Joan caught and loved. The rooms were taken, the bags sent for, and still the excitement of adventure persisted. It seemed, indeed, to gather force.

Breakfast was included in the price named for the rooms, but by a little coaxing Joan prevailed upon Mrs. Jones to give her all her meals when she was in the house.

"They'll be plain, ma'am, I'm taking no one but yourself."

"I'd like to—to share yours, if you will let me. I shall be out a great deal. I mean to walk and ride horseback, but when I am here it would be such a pleasure to have whatever you have."

Mrs. Jones, watching the lovely face, the twitching of the lip, and the smile, felt herself dangerously relaxing and, in consequence, named a daring price for extra meals. So happily did Joan accept the terms that Mrs. Jones felt contrite and determined to make it up in some way.

The first relenting was in the form of coals. "I forgot to mention," Jane Jones explained, bending before the tiny grate in Joan's sitting room, "that at the price I set for meals, extra, fire is included."

"Isn't that too generous?" Joan asked.

Mrs. Jones's face flushed, and she laid a huge lump of coal upon the smaller lumps. She had a reverent way of placing the coal; she told Joan later, during one of their many wonderful talks, that after seeing the misery and horrors of the mines she felt like breathing a prayer over every lump. "The women never knowing at morning whether they'll see their men at night, nor their small lads that are sucked into the mines!"

By the time Jane Jones got as intimate as that Joan had broken through the crust of the woman and found a friend. "Was your husband a miner?" she asked.

"Not exactly, sort of a—a watchman he was, and I know the good Lord is making up to my man for the things he did *not* see, but was paid for seeing." Jane Jones had the easy morality of the pitiful.

Joan slept as she had not slept in years. The house, with its back to its neighbors, was quiet and, in a way, secluded. What occurred at the rear doors and windows did not seem to have anything in common with what went on in the front. The roughly paved street led crookedly into a dirt road which in turn ambled on to Dartmoor and there lost itself among the hillocks, creeping into sight, now and then, and finally merging into an almost hidden path leading to a sacred pile of stone that ignorant visitors mistook for the site of a deserted mine. The front of Jane Jones's house opened to enchanted ways!

In short tweed skirt, stout boots, and a most captivating red tam, Joan on her third day in lodging took to the paths leading to the moors. The two days previous had been devoted to purchases—the tam, heavy woolen stockings, etc., and to listening to Jane Jones's philosophy of life, which seemed to consist of all the odds and ends of creeds and beliefs that had been discarded.

Like Margot, Jane had little use for the churches. "I've nothing against them except that I don't happen to need them. When I speak my mind folks get a scared look, and when I don't speak I am nigh to bursting. I've got into the way of asking the Lord of us all to come into my place and make Himself at home while I seek to serve Him as best I can. I'm a bit childish as I grow old."

Joan loved that. It accounted for the spotless purity of the rooms, the quality of the simple food. With such a Guest chancing to come in there could be no shirking according to Jane Jones's code.

"I'm not holding aught against man or woman," Jane further confided over an evening meal, "I've learned somewhat while I've trudged along. Most of them as judge free and bitter would do the same or worse if they had the temptation. As for me, I doubt if a big temptation ever came to me. I'm plain and my tastes are plain. Only once did I get my chance to fall—and that time I—fell! It taught me a God-learned lesson."

Joan never knew from what depths of depravity Jane Jones rose, but she learned to know at what pure heights she had attained.

So, properly equipped, Joan, day after day, roamed about, taking longer walks, often carrying a bit of lunch with her and remaining away until the long twilights faded into darkness. Usually Jane Jones was at the door to greet her. It was a happy feeling to have someone watching for her; someone glad that she had come back safe.

And so the days ran into weeks—four blessed, health-giving weeks, and then Joan got lost in a fog.

CHAPTER XV

JOAN loved Dartmoor. Day after day she went there. She had secured a sturdy little horse and often, taking a lunch with her, she rode over to the moors, tethered her horse, and either tramped for hours or sat idly dreaming and gazing over the wide spaces. She made no plans and smiled at the passing of time. Nothing really mattered; there was no hurry. It was blissful just to wait and see what might happen, knowing full well that nothing could happen that would disturb the sweet calm. This was England, the meaning of England. England knew so much, had endured and triumphed over so much, that nothing could disturb it—and it had shared its secret. Joan was content.

"Just why am I staying on?" she asked herself every morning when she awakened in the little room under the eaves. "I ought to go home. Grandy and Nancy want me"—the letters were indeed growing insistent—"but here I stay—waiting!"

It was that sense of waiting for something that amused Joan and eventually caused her to question it. Then one day as she sat on the moors, her horse contentedly nibbling near by, she gave a little laugh.

"I know! I'm waiting to see a real fog, one of the obliterators. I really came for that; I had almost forgotten." This playful excuse took on importance. Jane Jones had hinted at a fog as Joan rode off that morning,

but the still, clear day seemed to repudiate the suggestion of anything blotting it out. "I'd sit perfectly still and wait until it rolled away," Joan thought on, "eat my lunch and enjoy being part of the blur. The fogs are probably exaggerated, anyway, like the small brooks they call rivers."

The circle of stones by which Joan was resting had once been a sacred shrine, it was easy to pray here. So Joan's thoughts fell into an attitude of prayer—a happy, grateful prayer for everything, yes, everything! Just above on the top of the hillock was a shaft of stone, hoary with age, gray but unconquered by time. Another symbol of England. Joan never missed companionship on the moors; indeed, she seemed surrounded by companionship of a kind she had never shared before. A royal and satisfying company.

Just then a touring party, in a crowded char-à-bancs, swept by—a loud, strident interruption. Joan shrank down and escaped notice. Silence again. Presently Joan was conscious of the fragrance of flowers—how keen her senses had become in this peace and quiet—a dampness, a dimness! At this she started up.

"Perhaps a fog!" she thought, and thrilled at the possibility. Certainly everything was blurred. Off in the distance the grim outlines of the old prison were softened, hazy. But the road in the near distance was clear enough and the shaft, just above, was distinct. It would be wise, perhaps, to remain just where she was. The horse was safely tied, there was lunch to eat. The fog, if it were a fog, would not persist long. The sun, slightly obscure, to be sure, was warm and high in the sky. There was really nothing to do but content one's self and wait

for a possible adventure or, what was more likely, the rolling away of the fog and a quiet jog home later in the day.

So Joan, making doubly sure about her horse, walked to the base of the stone shaft and sat down—her lunch basket beside her. Then she watched the blotting out of the few objects that dotted the landscape. The outlines of the gray prison were—gone! The road merged into the general smudge and was—gone! Presently, as the damp coolness enveloped her, Joan felt a kind of unrest. Not fear, exactly, but a reaching out for something tangible.

"Perhaps I better go nearer the road," she unwisely thought; "I'll pace the distance, keeping straight ahead. The road is there, even if it is hidden."

Ten paces! Then Joan, clinging to her basket, bent down and felt about for good solid roadbed. Apparently she had either gone too far to the right or had not gone far enough. She got up and paced again. Then she lost her head. "I'll grope around and find that old shaft," she decided, but the stone finger eluded her. Almost she fancied it sidestepping like an ancient ghost in its native element. This way, that way, farther and faster than she realized, Joan paced. She forgot to count—she began again. With one hand she groped, with the other she clung to her basket. "I may reach the prison if I keep on"—she spoke in a whisper and felt like a wraith herself—"or I may run into some convict and we will escape together. I'm not above welcoming anything on feet now——" A slightly hysterical laugh warned Joan of tingling nerves.

"Here I take my stand!" she thought, rallying her

common sense. She was, seemingly, on the side of a little hill. She braced and reached out and then, purely for the effect upon her warning nerves, she cried: "Anybody near? I'm lost."

"So am I!"

Joan shrank, afraid to trust her senses. "At least this is better than being lost alone," she thought.

"Call again!" the muffled voice commanded.

Joan hesitated. Then, fearing to lose even this doubtful contact with a human being, she faltered, "Here! Here!"

At some distance the cheerful voice responded. "Coming!"

"Here!" This from Joan, and more confidently.

"Coming!" closer, closer.

Suddenly outstretched hands met, vague forms stood revealed, mistily.

"You haven't by any chance escaped, have you?" Joan had to say something to the big, looming figure near her.

"Apparently not. I'm not a Galsworthy hero." How quick he was on the uptake! Joan laughed relievedly and was conscious of her lunch basket. At least it offered an excuse for tiding over what might become an awkward situation.

The one thing Joan now dreaded above all else was being left alone on the moors in the fog. "I suppose we might as well eat luncheon," she said.

"Luncheon?" The man laughed.

"Yes—I've managed to cling to it up to now and I'll be glad to share it." They sat down, close, and then, with an apologetic "excuse me," edged off a little.

"I'm Kenneth Grahame," said the man, quick to ease the strain.

"I'm Joan Radcliffe." This was better.

"Happy to have run across you, Miss Radcliffe."

"Thanks. Have a sandwich?"

"Thanks. Yes. I'm from New York, U. S. A."

"So am I." They nibbled in silence for a moment. Then Grahame spoke.

"Queer, isn't it, how people can live in one city all their lives and never meet, and then take to prowling and run into each other—casually, like this?"

"I should say so!" Joan was conscious of the bigness of the man beside her, the gratifying sense of safety about him.

Grahame was conscious of Joan's sweet, well-bred voice, the fine contours of her face and body. "When you are rescued on the high seas you don't rely much upon conventions, do you?" he asked.

Joan gave this a moment's consideration and then was ashamed of her civilized cowardice. Besides, what was she going to do about it? "No," she replied easily, "it would be useless."

"Exactly. It generally is for the matter of that. May I have another sandwich? Are there enough for second helpings?"

"There are, or there were, six, besides a piece of gingerbread and a tartlet—a gooseberry tartlet. We'll divide them."

It seemed absurd to realize how they had in a few moments drifted into this state of comradeship. Joan recalled later that she and Grahame had not really talked much about themselves, and yet by some secret

code they seemed to cover vast areas of understanding.

"And so you are a business woman?" Grahame at the time was struggling with the tartlet. "I'm surprised."

"Why?" Joan looked at Grahame; the blur between them was protective, comforting.

"Oh! inherited limitations on my part, I suppose. I still find myself classifying women. Now this partner of yours, Nancy Holt. Was her father Abner Holt, by any chance?"

"Abner Holt was her grandfather."

"Indeed! He was a great old fellow. The younger men at the Union League were keen about him. We used to sit in a circle around him—listening. I sometimes have wondered if people in general knew what an influence he was to struggling young men."

"How Nancy would thrill if she could hear what you are saying." Joan's face flushed with pleasure. "To think that you belong to that old club and that you live in New York and all the rest, and then for me to meet you here!"

Grahame laughed, and went on quietly: "Oh! our not meeting was natural enough. Until a few years ago I had no time, money, or inclination for spreading out much. The Union League was a sort of inheritance from my father; it was my only extravagance. My mother insisted."

Then Joan, by a few swift, deft descriptions from Grahame, got a fairly clear idea of Mrs. Grahame—in a way she resembled Ted Roland's mother. She had been an invalid—the brave, uncomplaining variety, but evidently she had absorbed her son's life in spite of her bravery.

"She and I," Grahame was explaining, "always planned to come over and locate her clan—the family is pretty well wiped out. We had mapped a course of trail hunting and after she died—why, carrying out the scheme was an inheritance like the Union League."

"I see," Joan murmured. She was seeing, foggily. She glanced again at Grahame. "Enjoying it?" she asked.

"I'm going to. Along with other inherited traits I believe in foreordination. Scotch-Presbyterian brand, you know. Now this meeting"—he turned fully upon Joan—"hasn't it all the earmarks of—fatality?"

Joan admitted that it had and then boldly remarked: "But Patricia, my grandmother, you know, would consider it a fatal mistake to acknowledge that."

"She would." Grahame had got a very distinct impression of Patricia Henley. "*Grandes dames* would. But it's delightful to hear you refer to her as Patricia. She must have a most charming side."

"She has. She's marvelous."

Grahame took no notice of this. He was saying: "I worked my way up. You were carried aloft, but I fancy we were always headed for these moors and once here we felt our way toward each other through the fog—we could so easily have missed our way unless——"

Joan interrupted him. "I suppose you really mean what you are saying?" she asked.

"Oh! I do indeed. All my life I've been conscious of the sixth sense—another Scottish inheritance, but we all have it, as a matter of fact. Children, animals, and a few grown-ups manage to recognize it and cling to it like grim death. I've clung."

They were quiet for a space while they were traveling over vast territory, though neither realized it then. Joan was suddenly startled by hearing Grahame say:

"That's queer! I wonder if this murk is letting up. I see you quite distinctly—color, outline—you're rather satisfying!"

"Thanks!" Joan stopped; she dared not tell him that she had come to the same amazing conclusions, herself, about him. She saw now, rather than merely felt, the bigness of the man beside her. His face was rugged, the hair on the temple prematurely gray. He was not in any sense handsome, but he was—satisfying. Yes, that was the word. Satisfying. She changed the subject nervously.

"And I suppose this is hail and farewell? Just a joke on us?" Then she flushed. How crude and utterly idiotic her words sounded! A regular challenge! Grahame took it quite earnestly.

"I was going up into Scotland day after to-morrow," he said hastily, seeming to ignore Joan's words. "I've changed my mind, however."

"Why?" Joan felt angry; she was making matters worse, like some crude, silly schoolgirl.

"That's exactly what I'm going to find out." Another heavy silence—more distances spanned.

Joan's trained senses warned her that something rather dangerous and absurd threatened, but she flouted the warning. Grahame was saying, "Now about that sixth sense. If you question it, doubt it, you lose out."

"What do you do about it?" A bit of daring again entered Joan's tone now.

"I try not to snub it. It's a great asset if you play

fair." Then, more seriously: "You see my work is among men and women. I have to select, place, and help make successes of my choices. Justify myself, as it were. If I give this sixth sense of mine respect I rarely regret it, though I have to keep the secret to myself. Consider this confidential." They laughed at this.

"And you never make mistakes?" Joan asked a bit caustically. She was fumbling to regain her poise, her attitude of a business woman. The fog was certainly clearing away.

"Oh, yes, often; but I'm always conscious that it is I, not the sense, that's at the bottom of the trouble. I butt in at the critical moment."

"But this is hardly practical, is it?"

"The butting in?"

"No, the dependence upon anything so—well, at the least, so problematical?"

"I try never to let it interfere in the affairs of others, but you see I'm manager of a big firm. I travel a good deal, handle men, judge them, weigh them. I rarely find I'm wrong if I follow my scent. But I'm boring you. See!"

And then suddenly they both saw quite distinctly. The fog had lifted, rolled away. The outlines of the prison walls rose grimly against a sky that was making ready for a splendid sunset. The road, far below where they sat, wound empty in both directions; the horse at some little distance was nibbling away as contentedly as if nothing had happened!

"Your horse?"

"Yes. He has been eating his head off. I hope stubble won't unfit him for travel."

Grahame and Joan got up; they stood facing each other, confused, awkward. It was like coming out of a hypnotic state and wondering if they had said or done ridiculous things.

"How lovely she is!" thought the man.

"How remarkable!" thought Joan. "I know all about him—does he suspect?"

"Let me carry the basket." The empty, light thing was dangling from Joan's hand.

"Thanks."

They wandered toward the horse and Joan mounted. "Good-bye and—and thanks for everything." Joan felt like crying and then pulled herself together. How utterly absurd the whole situation was! She was sorry to part from this man!

Grahame stood by the roadside, his cap in his hand, the rising wind lifting the hair from his rugged, tanned face. "Good-bye and good luck, and thank you—for everything."

The adventure was at an end. Joan's little horse trotted on. Once Joan looked back. Grahame was standing just where she had left him—hat in hand.

"He doesn't even want me to see what direction he takes," she thought, and felt desperately lonely. "Very well, gentleman of the fog, I suppose that sixth sense of yours is getting busy."

It was. Grahame was heeding it as he watched Joan's stiff young back rise and fall. Even her backward look did not move him to ordinary response; it merely emphasized what was working in his mind. Once Joan was at a safe distance, Grahame, believing that he had discovered the "scent," smiled and followed on. His long

strides, after a while, brought him in sight of Joan's back—not quite so stiffly rigid. He followed on. He made a detour as he watched Joan dismount at the first cottage. Then, having located her, he made his way into Plymouth town and informed the clerk of his trim little hotel that he had decided to remain indefinitely instead of leaving the next day.

Jane Jones had been seriously concerned about Joan. The fog was the worst one the moors had known in years, but it was, she realized, a short-lived one and during the long day she had watched for the horse. Had he come back riderless she would have started forth at once. In the meantime she had spent her energies upon cooking, cleaning, and fancying, in her childishly romantic fashion, that God had dropped in and was taking pleasure in her activities, approving of them. She even went so far as to set a chair at her little table while eating her noonday meal and finding real comfort in her Guest. There were so many hidden, intimate, and hurting things to talk over in the quiet and, wrapped about with thick fog that shut all else out and Him in, Jane enjoyed her quiet time. She bowed her head at its close and gave thanks.

In that mood she met Joan—her plain face still radiant from the light of the Presence. Little by little Joan, in her driblet way, shared the day's experience with Jane Jones. Patricia would have taken alarm; chafed at the scraps oozing out. Not so Jane Jones. She was too fresh from the hour of revelation to be surprised by anything, and too grateful for Joan's company to dicker as to how much or how little she might claim.

"Well now!" she exclaimed at last. "It's all just

wonderful magic—I call it. Them moors are queer, haunted things. You're sure it was a flesh and blood man?"

"Quite, quite sure. You should have heard what he said about your tartlet."

"Now then. Fancy! But a fine bygone gentleman coming back to haunt the old scenes might have said the same."

"Not as *he* said it." Joan shook her head.

"There's them as say they've seen strange signs and sights on the moors," Jane continued. "There was a poor creature as escaped once and came to my door. He told me he was 'led' by a drifting kind of ghost thing. The lad was near to the end of his tether when he got here and I knew they'd be after him soon for all the leading he'd got. Then it sort of came to me that he'd been led to *me* and it was up to me to carry the leading on."

"And you did?" Joan asked.

"I did!" This with some pride.

Joan laughed. She knew better than to question further.

"And you," Jane was asking, "what are you going to do about this man of yours?"

Joan colored at the words. Then: "Oh! just see what happens," she said, and felt suddenly the elation of the moors returning.

CHAPTER XVI

MANY things happened, and they began the next morning. Joan slept late, but was awakened at last by the sound of voices from the room below and the stamping of horses' feet outside. At first she thought she was still dreaming, or emerging from a dream. The sounds were unusual and interesting, so she made a hasty toilet and started down the little crooked stairway leading from the tiny landing by her door to the narrow hall below.

From the bottom step Joan could look into Jane Jones's living room where the round table was spread for breakfast. Jane, moving about in the kitchen beyond, was laughing and talking to someone just out of her sight, but the voice stayed Joan and brought the quick color to her face. Sitting astride a chair, his arms folded upon the back, was Kenneth Grahame. Stepping to the door of the living room, Joan saw him before he heard her.

He looked wind-blown and hearty; his riding boots bore the signs of long rides and hastily removed mud.

"It's just the matter of setting another plate and cup," Jane was saying, "and it's often I set them just for the sake of making believe."

"So he's come to breakfast," thought Joan. "I wonder if he knew Jane Jones yesterday and just led me on?" But she knew Grahame had not known Jane—he

had *not* led her on. "He's just found me out by chance," she thought.

That was not exactly what Grahame had done, but he certainly had not led Joan on—he had simply followed her. From his hotel clerk he had learned a good deal about Jane Jones and later, in his room, while he smoked luxuriously, he had outlined his course as best he could, lured by that sixth sense of his. He had not slept much, but a little sleep went a long way with Grahame. For a time he had put up a common-sense fight with his inclinations and their leadings, then he had abdicated and had gone to sleep at three in the morning, risen at six, fed his horse, saddled it and rode for two hours on the empty roads, finally bringing up, in a starved condition, at Jane Jones's just at breakfast time.

Before leaving his hotel, however, he had left word that an extra horse should be at Mrs. Jones's by eight o'clock. That and his own were stamping restlessly when Joan awoke.

The minor details, such as winning Jane Jones to his support, convincing Joan that he was not mad, etc., did not greatly concern Grahame. The main facts were overpowering, and he had already set out upon the one big adventure of his life. No one had ever so charmed him as Joan. He seemed to have known about her, been waiting for her, and suddenly she had been revealed to him. There must be no time lost. The absurdity of all this not for one moment occurred to Grahame. Now that he had shed minor, conventional obstacles, it all seemed sane enough. Jane Jones had been an easy conquest.

"So you're my young lady's man?" she had cried after Grahame's explanation. Her imagination fired; she became at once a victim of suggestion and a vicarious adventurer. And so it was that Joan sat opposite Grahame at breakfast. It was all very merry, there were scones and bacon and eggs. Grahame had two eggs; there was coffee which Joan made, and several kinds of jam which Grahame sampled.

"I see two horses," Joan said, trying to escape Grahame's gaze by looking past him and out of the window; "at least I *think* I do."

"Yes, the one you rode yesterday was a patient, good-intentioned beast, but unfitted for a long ride, so I brought another. If Mrs. Jones will put us up a lunch we'll make a day of it."

Joan gasped, tried to muster something approaching what Patricia might expect of her, and failed. Instead, she laughed. "I see! You expect me to—to go with you?"

"Surely. I've planned every detail, and the day's wonderful."

At ten o'clock they trotted off. It was along about noon that Joan, her face radiant and bewildered, felt called upon to remark inanely: "Of course this is quite, quite mad."

"Or entirely natural—primitive, if you like." Grahame turned to give Joan the benefit of his broad, boyish smile. It made his deep eyes look older, graver, in contrast.

"I never did such a thing before." This sounded senile.

"One doesn't, in a lifetime."

"Oh, I'm only talking!" Joan felt uncomfortable, as if she were putting a wrong interpretation upon an innocent and beautiful thing. Then, because once you begin to slip you are apt to gain momentum, she went on: "You do not know even whether I am married or —single."

"Does it matter?"

"Of course not!" Joan felt ashamed of herself. "I mean of course it does. Oh, I don't mean that either!"

"The worst thing about so-called civilization," Grahame was saying comfortingly, "is this: It's only skin deep at the best and when something really tremendous rises it tries to smother it, get it out of sight under the smug veneer—and fails. Now what I really mean is, I know you are not married, but if you were it wouldn't really matter—the actual occurrence. It would matter, of course, how we handled it."

To this Joan dared make no reply. She feared she might slip irretrievably.

"We'll feel better after we eat." Grahame pulled his horse up beside Joan. "I superintended the lunch, giving heed to tartlets. They're gooseberry again to-day. And here's the sacred pile of stones I wanted to bring you to. Great, isn't it? We'll have a kind of sacred festival here."

They dismounted. It took some little time to feed the horses, and during that interval Joan tried to regulate her emotions. It was no use. One long glance of Grahame's eyes, one of his contagious smiles, and the control gave way. Not even common-sense probabilities helped—they really did not seem to matter. "I declare!" thought Joan, watching Grahame advancing,

but did not declare anything! "I believe!" Then: "It simply could *not* be!"

They sat for two hours on the little hillock while the breeze of a perfect English day swept over them, laden with fragrance from roses climbing over old gray stone walls in the distance; the subtle sea smells from the far Devon coast and all the shy, hiding flowers of the moors near by.

They talked in snatches—a habit that grew upon them; and the silences in between were heavy with significance. They went home in the purpling twilight—the late, brief twilight. They rode slowly.

"To-morrow at nine?" Grahame asked, as he helped Joan dismount.

"Yes, and do come to breakfast."

"Shall I?"

"Jane Jones would feel hurt if you did not." Joan had ceased to argue with herself. But in her small room under the eaves that night she tried with all the strength at her command and all the honest common sense of which she was capable to reduce things to normal. They simply refused to be controlled. "Manlike, he thinks . . ." Joan followed that trail sturdily. She knew something of men. But Grahame eluded her when he became one of a group.

"Just remember Norman Grey!" At this Joan's rapid thoughts halted. In the darkness of the room something bore down upon her for a moment and then lifted. "There were hours *then,* when something ran away, escaped——" But it was no use. Joan drew a long breath and knew that this experience was different. Nothing was escaping her. Intact, all there was in her,

of her, was working along a clearly marked trail. "I'm not in the least mad—I'm falling in love!" she admitted frankly, and felt better after that.

At the end of the second day—it was spent on the Cornish coast and they had gone by automobile—Joan admitted that she was in love with Grahame. Deeply, sincerely. "It's like faith," she murmured softly, "believing in something you know isn't true. All the same ——" And then, after a moment's reflection: "And he loves me! Now, what?" It was how they were to handle this strange thing that had befallen them that mattered. This gave Joan much to think about; Grahame, could she but have known it, was troubled by no doubts at all.

Having emerged from the fog, he was perfectly clear as to his future course. It was always that way with Grahame. Once he freed himself from complications, fixed upon a definite line of thought or action, he never turned back. He tried to regard his failures as assets; he never permitted them to be anchors. After his father's death he had decided that a business career, not a professional one, was to be his portion, and he turned upon it resolutely all the creative and imaginative force of his mind. Business was never dull routine to him and because of that his influence and importance were soon felt.

In like manner he had undertaken his first vacation in years. He had shed responsibilities, had permitted himself dreams and fulfillments of old hopes, and he had met, under dramatic conditions, a woman who, from the first moment, charmed and fascinated him. His imagination, not his critical sense, dealt with the situation, and something very deep and true took root.

Had either Joan or Grahame, at that stage, dragged the emotion into the glare of reason and doubt to classify it and note its growth, it would have shriveled and died, or become one of those rather dangerous affairs that so often flare and wane when two people, detached from familiar restrictions, permit themselves license. As it was, it became embedded and was strengthened by constant companionship and the sense of similarity of tastes and interest. Had they known each other in the usual ways they could not, in years, have gained the knowledge of each that they gained in those days on the moors and by the sea.

They read together, sometimes sang together old ballads as they wandered on foot or horseback for hours and hours. Suddenly they realized that they understood each other, and they depended upon this. They did not analyze it. Then, quite as suddenly, they knew that this understanding had merged into love. What were they to do about it?

Grahame had no hesitation as to his course—he was going to win Joan if he could! He did not startle her by any common demonstration of look or touch. When his eyes rested upon her they brought a great peace and sense of safety to her; when he by chance did touch her he reassured her, did not arouse any fear.

They both knew how things were and Jane Jones knew also; but all three regarded it, more or less consciously, as something intangible, but very real. It was like the scent of the sea coming in over the moors, or the hint of color in the dry grasses—the color that preceded heather and gorse. They knew the sea and the flowers from the scent and the tint, and they accepted

the joy of it without question. At least Grahame and Jane Jones did. Joan had her moments of grave questioning.

Joan at this stage ceased writing to Patricia and Nancy. She sent an occasional cable and read their puzzled letters with growing unrest. There were times when she feared Patricia and Nancy, together or apart, would waylay her at Jane Jones's door some day—the thought frightened her. So thoroughly had her experience separated her from her old life that even such love as she felt for Patricia and Nancy took on the guise of love for ones who no longer really existed. She spoke of this to Grahame. He looked at her broodingly.

"As I feel about my mother," he said.

"Yes, something like that. See how selfish I am?"

And then quite like a bolt from the blue Grahame said, "I wish, Joan, that you'd marry me and come to Scotland with me." The marrying part was mentioned incidentally, much as he might have said, "Let us take this train for the highlands."

Joan did not answer; something was choking her.

They were jogging homeward, the saddlebags swaying, the unreal light of a red sunset enveloping them.

"I cannot go alone, Joan. Of course I'll wait for you if you insist—but there must be an end to the moors and the coast here—there is everything else beyond, waiting for us."

"The—highlands——" Joan spoke brokenly.

"Yes—all the highlands, darling!"

"How sure you are, Ken."

"Of course. Aren't you?"

"You—never doubt?"

"I never have since the fog cleared. Before that I had my doubts about your loveliness. You might have had green eyes or a snub nose——"

"Or some other kind of a twist that you might not fancy."

Grahame laughed. "I should have trusted more," he said quietly.

"Trusted that sense of yours?"

"Of—ours. Yes."

They rode on silently for a space, then Grahame spoke again, this time gravely. "Of course, once I give up to what the Yankees call horse sense, I can understand your hesitation, my dear——"

"And yours?" Joan broke in.

"I have none. I never had after that fog cleared. I felt then that I had always known you, been waiting for you. That you had been coming to me, but it is natural that you—should hesitate."

"Why, Ken?"

"Doesn't a woman always? Perhaps she has more at stake."

"I cannot see that!"

"A man knows what he wants—at least some men do."

"But suppose they are misled?"

"You forget how we found each other, Joan!"

"You are hopelessly romantic." Joan bent her head.

"Granted!" Then: "I have enough to begin on, Joan, if you want to be practical."

"I don't—I don't, Ken! More than anything else in life I want to be wildly romantic—but dare I?"

"Yes. Listen, Joan, let us be married by one of those

sacred circles on the moor. We'll take Jane Jones along. The minister of the little church near my hotel is a great young fellow. I know him fairly well—he'll marry us. You see, sweet, if I let you slip away from this enchanted land that Patricia and Nancy of yours will get hold of you and there will have to be a big wedding. Oh! my Lord. Instead, after looking up my mother's people in Scotland we'll go back to America and give them the thrill of their lives, and they'll have no other responsibility than to thrill. Joan, look in my eyes!"

Joan turned; their horses, as if by an order, stopped to nibble at some overhanging vines against a gray wall. "Yes, Ken."

"I love you utterly and entirely. I believe I can make you happy—I know you love me. A man does know that when he loves as I do. I know, also, that there is no reason why you should not trust me—so, my dear, will you come to me?"

The tears dimmed Joan's eyes, her lip gave the nervous twitch. "Oh, Ken," she said, "we are quite, quite mad."

"And you will?"

"Yes—Ken."

"When?"

"Whistle and I'll come to thee, my lad." Joan's voice broke.

"Joan!"

At that point an automobile, dashing along the road, sounded its horn and Grahame's horse leaped back and reared.

"Be on your guard, Ken," Joan cried. "There's an ugly look in that horse's eyes."

"A sudden noise makes him panicky," Grahame called back. He was gradually getting control of the animal by letting him have a little leeway, but letting him feel the bit at the same time. After a few minutes the battle was won and Grahame turned and brought his sweating horse to terms.

"Get another mount to-morrow, Ken." Joan's face was white.

"That would be a mean trick to play on Gillie." Grahame was patting the horse's neck. "After coming to an understanding and accepting an apology, it would seem caddish to turn a chap down, eh, old man?" The horse quivered, but obeyed Grahame's touch upon the rein.

"All the same, Ken——" but Joan said no more.

"I wager the beastie will carry me safely enough, my girl, to our journey's end. After that I promise to change horses." Grahame smiled and again patted his horse.

It was within sight of Jane Jones's cottage that the thing happened. A boy, driving a crazy old car, rattled along the rough road and, partly from a cloddish idea of fun, partly because the ruts in the road swung him off his course, he sounded his raucous horn blatantly.

Grahame's horse, suffering still from his recent fright, gave a mad plunge. No one was clear as to just what occurred. Joan saw the horse rear, plunge again, and then hurl Grahame off! Grahame's body struck a stone wall with terrific force, and then, like a broken, dead thing, it lay huddled by the road.

Joan did not faint. She knew perfectly well that she was bending over Grahame, calling for help.

The horses ran toward the village; Jane Jones came; the boy in the crazy car was saying things—many things, and Jane was ordering him about.

Then the scene shifted—just how this was accomplished Joan never knew. It did not matter, she was close to Grahame. Jane Jones was calm and clear-headed. Presently Grahame was lying on Jane's bed in the austere little room beyond the living room. Things shaped themselves naturally, a doctor came—later a nurse. Then after hours, it seemed, the doctor brought two men—two more doctors—and it was night, a black night lost in fog.

When Jane Jones brought food to Joan, Joan tried to eat but choked over it piteously.

"Drink, then," ordered Jane, and Joan drank. That was easier.

"I've got something to—to tell him," Joan whispered at last as she stood by Grahame's bed and watched the men and women—they seemed to fill the room and each one was busy, gruesomely busy. They pushed her aside. "I tell you—I must speak to him—alone." But no one paid the least attention to her, not even Jane, who appeared to be drawn into the dreary business the moment she entered the room.

"Is—he dead?" This to Jane as she passed, carrying a basin of water.

"No."

"Then I must——"

"Now, lass, show sense, you cannot tell him anything now."

Joan leaned against the wall. All she saw was Grahame's white, still face on the pillow, his relaxed hands

spread out beside him. She wanted to tell him about—Norman Grey! It was the only thing she had not told him. It really did not matter much, only she wanted him to know that *she* knew that she *could* tell him; wanted to share even that with him, knowing that he would understand!

Someone brought a chair to her and she sat down. Then someone asked her if she were Grahame's wife. She wanted to laugh at that—what difference did it make?

"Are you?"

The man, it was one of the doctors, was insistent.

"I am going to marry him—to-morrow." For some reason this seemed to make the man regard her in a new light—he even laid his hand upon hers while he said:

"My dear young lady, you must be as brave as you can. You look like a brave girl."

"You mean?"

The man nodded.

"And—he'll never speak to me again?"

"He may—there may be a few moments when he will know you, need you—for that chance you must be brave. Will you try?"

"Yes, yes. What must I do?"

Presently Jane brought her something more to drink. It was something that crept through her body like a warm, reviving sense of life.

"Open the window!" someone whispered.

"There's a black fog, sir."

"Open both windows!" And the fog drifted in like a

spiritual vapor. The lights grew dim in it—it felt cold and damp. Just for one moment Joan's senses reeled.

"I'm lost,'" she murmured, but no one heard her. No one but Grahame!

Suddenly his eyes opened and he smiled—that strange, safe smile of his. Joan at once was kneeling beside him, her face pressed against his arm. "So—am—I," he whispered, and tried to raise his arm—failed, and the smile faded from his lips. After a moment, and with a great effort, he spoke again. Grimly, slowly. There was no time to be lost, no haggling. Everyone seemed to realize this. "Bring the minister."

One of the doctors left the room.

"I want to marry—this girl."

How terrible the words sounded! But Grahame mustered a smile to soften them.

"You'll do this, Joan?" he whispered.

"Clear the room," and everyone drifted out but Jane and one of the doctors.

Joan looked at Jane Jones, who stood close beside her, and Jane bent and whispered: "Lass, you're not going to say him nay?" Then fiercely, "You'll be making heaven that bit brighter for him—the God who has brought you together—demands this of you."

Jane knew her God!

The door opened. The minister came in. He was young and grave. Almost breathless, too, from hurry.

"Are—they ready?" he asked.

The doctor and Jane nodded.

CHAPTER XVII

SOMEWHERE off in the distance a church bell rang; the sound came dully, as if the fog muffled it. Joan bent close to Grahame—someone had made her comfortable with pillows—Jane Jones, probably, or the nurse who passed to and fro like a ghost. The fog was still filling the room. Sometimes a doctor entered and looked at Grahame—and went out.

Occasionally Grahame opened his eyes, made a piteous attempt to hold to consciousness. "You—did it, Joan?"

"Yes, Ken."

"We—played the game, not by rule!"

"No, Ken, not by rule."

"You're—glad?"

"Very glad."

"Lovely——" Then, after a long pause, "The fog——"

"Shall we close the windows, dearest?"

"No. I—like it. We know—the way out, Joan."

"Yes, we'll just—wait."

"Together."

"Together, always, Ken."

"Splendid—Joan!"

It was quite beyond reason, but presently Joan slept—or lost consciousness. It was as if she had died. When she started up the room seemed full of people; it was daylight and the fog had disappeared.

"Mrs. Grahame—meaning you, ma'am——" Jane Jones had her arms around Joan.

"Yes—of course. Is—is Ken dead?" This she asked of a tall stranger who seemed to fill the room by his presence.

"This is the big doctor down from London, ma'am," Jane explained.

"There's a chance, Mrs. Grahame, for your husband's life." The man spoke slowly and kept his eyes on Joan. There was no time to waste and Dr. McPherson knew how to deal with women. Joan gave him hope even in her bewilderment.

"His—life?"

"Yes. A chance—but it's worth taking."

"Surely!"

"We're going to move him to a hospital, with your consent."

"I may go with him?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then. I am ready."

McPherson liked that. His eyes grew softer as he turned to make arrangements. Another shifting of scenes.

A white, sunny room and Joan waiting in it. They would bring Grahame here—when "it" was over. They were giving him his chance in a distant and silent place. "I want to be here alone when he comes," she had said. So they left her alone and through the window came the sweet scent of flowers borne on the breezes from the moors.

And then it all occurred so quietly, so naturally—Grahame was on the narrow white bed, his head

swathed in bandages—only his closed eyes, his thin nose, and stern mouth showing. Joan did not ask any questions, she simply took her place beside the bed and with folded hands—waited. Hours, hours! Daylight and darkness—when it was dark she went somewhere and lay down on a little bed like Grahame's. When it was light she sat by his bed or walked, when she was ordered to do so, in the garden. Hours and hours and hours. They seemed to make years. And then, it came like a revelation, Grahame opened his eyes, smiled.

"I am going to get over this," he said confidently, and Joan knew that he was!

"What have you done for me, dear heart, do you know?" Grahame asked one day when everyone knew the danger was passed.

"Taken advantage of you!" Joan whispered, leaning her head on his pillow, "marrying you when you were too weak to protest."

"Joan——"

"Yes, Ken."

"Queer, what fancies one has when his head is battered and only one corner of his brain works. I was afraid you wouldn't or couldn't put it through—the marrying, you know—and I felt that if I went out—to —to whatever there is to go to—I wanted the right to——"

"What, Ken?"

"Well, it isn't so clear now, Joan; it was the only thing that *was* clear then. I wanted the right to—prove your faith in me by telling someone that you'd married me."

"Oh, Ken!"

Slowly, cautiously, Grahame came back to life. There were glorious weeks in Scotland, "on the trails to Grahame's people." There was a growing and wonderful happiness, a sureness. "An enoughness!" Joan once said.

But Grahame shook his head at this. "I'm everlastingly—starving," he protested, "and you are such a—giver, Joan. A royal giver. Is there any limit to your—well, your yourness?" It was easy to laugh then; they laughed a great deal.

Cables were sent—business ones from Grahame; quieting ones to Patricia and Nancy, who were growing restive.

"I must buckle down soon and support my wife," Grahame said presently, and tried to look serious.

"I have enough for the wolf to nibble on," Joan reassured him, "and my business is booming. I have another letter from Nancy."

"See here, young woman, you took advantage of me *once,* I mean to be master now, and there's no lash like the money lash. And, by the way, you must let your people in on our secret."

At last Joan wrote to Patricia and Nancy. She sat up far into the night to do it while Grahame slept. In another fortnight she and Grahame were to sail. The letters must be written, and try as hard as Joan did to make them commonplace, they sounded like the wildest romance—tinged with incredible folly.

Patricia read Joan's letter and for the first time in her life was so utterly dumfounded that she went to

bed, refused herself to everyone, and permitted the report to leak out that she was ill.

Nancy was in her private office when she received her letter. It had the effect of reducing her to a state of alternate stupidity and quickened vision. She stared dully, cried foolishly, and suddenly radiated. Roland happened to be with her at the time.

"Joan's married to a perfectly strange man. She's gone to Scotland with him. She's made a damned fool of herself," Nancy informed Roland.

"Married—to whom?" Roland turned sharply.

"How do you suppose I know? I don't believe she knows herself. Of all the messes! It's like a family taint breaking out."

"Taint?" Roland looked helplessly befogged.

"Don't hold me up, Ted, for heaven's sake." Nancy clutched the letter. "I'm just saying things. I'm all in. Lord! Let's go to dinner."

As she was putting on her hat, she turned a transfigured face to Roland. "He—the man Joan's married to—had an accident. Joan went through the horror alone—alone! Oh! the blessed child—— Ted, can't you see how Joan could, and never flinch or make a fuss?"

Roland looked bewildered. "We'd better have dinner first, Nan. I confess to feeling as if—I'd gone through an accident."

"So do I, and it's done something to my heart. Of course a girl like Joan, when she came to a ditch, would go over, never *in*. It's what the landing has done to her that concerns me. After dinner I must go to Aunt Pat—I bet this has knocked her down. She isn't as good a sport as Joan."

Nancy found Patricia in a badly damaged condition, but she roused her by a trumpet call of duty.

"We've got to get into—action," she said.

"I feel like—like the Trents," wailed Patricia, turning her face to the pillow.

"But with better material to work on." Nancy walked to the closet. "What gown are you going to put on?" she asked.

Patricia, not having thought in terms of gowns, sat up. "What material?" she asked weakly, referring to Nancy's remark about the Trents, not the gown.

"Why, Joan herself. She's no fool; but Corlyss is!"

"Some man may have taken advantage of Joan," moaned Patricia in the words of her day and generation.

Nancy scoffed. "There isn't a man alive who could do that," she said, and stiffened. Then: "And now that I'm coming to——"

"To what?" faltered Patricia, putting her feet out of bed; her mind was sluggish.

"My senses. I own to having been, for the moment, smashed, but I'm coming to. Joan says this man of hers, this Kenneth Grahame, knew my grandfather. It begins to come back to me—the name, fine one, isn't it? Here's your slip, Aunt Pat. This Kenneth Grahame was one of the young men Grandfather liked. He said every time he opened his mouth he said something."

"What?" Patricia was drawing on her silk stockings.

"Oh, things—not mere gabble. It all comes back to me in snatches. This Grahame had worked his way up and out and—and into——"

"Oh, Nancy, do confine yourself to facts." Patricia drew her gown over her head.

Nancy, sitting on the foot of the disheveled bed, enumerated facts sketchily. "Scotch descent—burrhs, you know, on occasional words. Did his own thinking. Widow mother—but no hanger-on. College—beginning at the bottom of some kind of business stunt where he handled men, not machines. That was what tickled Grandfather, that one so young could tackle that kind of a job and know the difference between men and machinery. Oh! I remember it all now. I wanted Grandfather to introduce me to him, bring him home to dinner. He wouldn't be brought—didn't have any use for girls—and Joan has walked off with him!"

At this Nancy felt her own spirits rise, and Patricia, putting a little rouge on her cheeks, took heart. "It looks," she said, with some show of her old self, "as if we'd have to set some sort of stage for—for Joan."

Nancy was alert. "Of course, and with some enthusiasm," she cried.

Patricia sat down. "The air in here is stuffy," she exclaimed, "let us go downstairs, Nancy. I want to think!"

In the library it was easier to plan.

"Nancy, my dear, I do not think I have ever really fled before from any duty, but I—am frightened now."

"Frightened? What of?" Nancy was walking about the room, smoking a cigarette. "Frightened because Joan has taken the bit in her teeth? After all, Aunt Pat, it is *her* bit, and she has a right to grip it if she wants to. I have great faith in Joan."

"Nancy, if I should run away for a week or so, do

you, could you, would you do a little stage setting?" This was asking a great deal and it proved the extent of Patricia's rout.

"I'd like nothing better." Nancy flung her cigarette into a receiver and faced Patricia. "This is a one-man job, Aunt Pat, until the curtain is rung up. I'll look over old letters from Grandfather, I'll think back, and I'll contrive such a background for this Kenneth Grahame that all he'll have to do when he steps on the stage will be to strut."

"Suppose—he refuses to—strut, Nancy? Suppose he would spoil everything if he tried?"

"Again I say, I pin my faith on Joan. And now where will you go, Aunt Pat?"

"Up to Maine."

"Up—to—Maine." Nancy spoke slowly. She was already thinking back. "Oh, yes, up to Maine. Well, I shall want your address."

Patricia wasted no time. She was with Margot at the week's end. Margot was shocked at Patricia's appearance and alarmed at Patricia's state of mind.

Fear is contagious, and the two women began to talk in whispers and cast nervous glances about. Little Bethan complicated matters. Patricia had not seen her in a long while. The radiant, healthy child, looking so exactly as Joan had looked at her age, increased the sense of panic which Margot completed by contributing an item about Norman Grey.

"That man who wanted to buy the hill land, my lady, has been back two or three times."

"What did he want?" Patricia's face went whiter. She had hoped her check had quieted that danger.

"He can't bear to give up—the land."

"I'll see that he *does* give it up!" Patricia set her lips.

"I gave him your address, my lady."

"Very well, he'll not trouble you again." Then Patricia told Margot of Joan's marriage.

"To—to the man who——"

But Patricia shook her head. "Margot, you have been faithful and have done a wonderful thing. You do not regret it? You are still willing to—to do what is right?"

"What—is right, my lady?"

The two women were watching little Bethan darting across the floor, her arms outspread, her tiny hands trying to clutch some unseen object while her pretty laugh rippled joyously in the fear-charged room.

"What is she doing?" Patricia asked.

" 'Tis her play, my lady. She's somehow different from other lasses. Toys don't please her overmuch. She cares for them, keeps them tidy, but a sunbeam or a flying leaf—they catch her eye. She's always chasing some flying thing, never crying because she cannot clutch it—it's the fun of the chase she finds her joy in."

"A strange child," murmured Patricia, and her eyes brooded.

"Just—different, my lady."

"What does she call you, Margot?"

"Aunty Margot, my lady. Do you object?"

"No—certainly not."

In her chase Bethan passed from the room. It was easier to talk with the child out of sight.

"She is safe?" Patricia asked.

"Quite—my lady. She's walked since she was ten months old."

Then Patricia, still in a half whisper, asked the question that she had come to ask. "Margot—I have never regretted what I did—what I asked you to help me do. This marriage of Joan's confirms me in my belief that we did right, but it makes caution doubly necessary. Would you—should it prove best—go back to Scotland?" Patricia watched Margot's face color and twitch.

"There's naught for me to go back to, my lady. Alone, you mean?"

"No—you must take Bethan."

"But Miss Joan, my lady—she must have told——"

"You forget—she does not *know*."

"But, my lady, once she has been told and her husband accepts—she will have her say." Then: "You promised to tell her sometime, my lady. Have you forgot?"

Patricia flinched. "No. I have not forgotten, but if Miss Joan has *not* told—it is that that I am facing."

"But, my lady, Miss Joan is not that sort. She must have told—somewhat!"

Was it possible that Nancy, Margot, everyone knew Joan better than her own flesh and blood knew her? Patricia's eyes flashed.

Margot suddenly got up and stood in front of Patricia. "I'll bide here, my lady, and wait until—I know!"

This was open revolt, and Patricia realized it. She compromised. "Margot, suppose Joan, not having told her husband, should come to see you. She might, you know."

"I shall be ready for her, my lady. I've lived for the time of telling with heart sorrow, my lady, but the child must have a name. All along I've clung to that even when the thought of giving her up hurt cruelly bad."

"You refuse to—to help me, Margot?"

"I'll bide the time," Margot said.

And with that Patricia had to be content. After two days she went back to New York comforted, and there she found Nancy had wasted no time.

A most romantic and plausible background had been created. Several people, it appeared, knew all about Kenneth Grahame, in a general way at least.

"It was almost too easy," Nancy explained, flushed with triumph.

"I'll wait until I have had a talk with Joan," Patricia sought to fortify herself as she looked on.

From an old diary which her grandfather had kept Nancy had selected enough to build upon, and by the time Joan and Grahame reached New York Patricia felt sure that Nancy's structure would support their weight.

Very quietly and naturally Joan and Grahame arrived in New York and went at once to Patricia's. Grahame's health was still too precarious to admit of any social excitement. That was clear enough, but he fitted into Joan's home life perfectly and was able after the first week to appear at small, carefully selected dinners, and daily he spent several morning hours gathering up the dropped threads of his business.

Everyone liked Grahame. The excitement died down —he was accepted, and Joan was looked upon as a lucky girl and an illuminating proof of the superiority of the

modern young woman's capacity for taking care of herself and, as Corlyss Trent added, "looking out for number one."

"Just as soon as Ken is able to travel to and from the city," Joan explained, "we are going down to his place on Long Island."

"Oh, he has a 'place'?" Nancy asked. "And you, Joan, are you leaving me in the lurch?"

"No, dear, I'm going to stand by as long as you want me. I expect you to help me with our home. Ken and his mother lived there; since her death it has been closed. It's a darling place, an old farmhouse, originally. They tore everything down but the chimney and built around that a house that looks as if they had brought it over bodily from Scotland. I'm keen about it."

Nancy turned deep eyes on Joan. "You're keen about everything," she said.

"Yes. I'm perfectly happy, Nan!"

"Doesn't it—frighten you?"

"Yes, sometimes. I'm going slow and stepping light, hoping I'll be overlooked when heavy missiles fly."

"You know, I did not believe such things really existed, Joan."

"Nor I, Nan. At times—" Joan paused, her eyes filled and she turned away as she added—"at times I dare not try to understand."

"Joan has the divine spark," Nancy confided later to Patricia. "Corlyss has the spark, only it isn't divine in her case. You may laugh at me, Aunt Pat, but when I enter Ken's and Joan's presence, something like taking shoes off my feet happens to my brains."

"Your tendency to sentimentality, Nancy, my dear, alarms me."

"It need not. It's like a good, cool bath. It's toning me up."

Of course, Joan had her hours of detachment. Hours when Grahame and the great love that was theirs were left at a distance while she detached herself and contemplated them. In England, and later in Scotland, she had not tried to break from the hold they had upon her. She had done the only thing possible and she had devoted herself to seeing it through. Since Grahame had not died, she had to hold him to life by every effort in her power. That was simple enough, and day by day her happiness and his grew.

"We were great gamblers, Joan," Grahame often said, and once Joan had replied:

"I wonder if we were, Ken? A great gambler is tested by his losses, isn't he?"

"Oftener his gains are his—Waterloos."

"Well, anyway, Ken——" Joan broke off and Grahame added:

"Exactly! Anyway, we took the chance and—won the game!"

But in Patricia's house, with Patricia's evident anxiety confronting her, Joan drew back and looked the situation over from every angle and at a critical distance. At last she decided to have a talk with Patricia. "Grandy's growing old," she wistfully thought. "She's beginning to break, and I believed she never would." Patricia worried Joan—there was a delicacy about the older woman that had never been apparent in the old days.

"She looks—transparent," Joan thought. "The soul of her would have little trouble breaking through."

Joan was wonderfully tender of everyone; her happiness broadened and deepened every relation, and she brooded now over Patricia even while she became conscious once more of the Look in Patricia's eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

GRAHAME, manlike, accepted his happiness and good fortune; he enshrined them, or at least relegated them to their proper niches and went about the daily business of life so long neglected. His eyes, when he glanced at Joan, told her all that her love yearned to know. Faith, perfect contentment—and she was thankful for Grahame's return to normal life and activity. It was more blessed to be part of that than of the idle joy of their first love. In turn she spent many hours each day with Nancy, many with Patricia during which they talked through the flimsy wall of silence that rose between them, and tried to reach each other by compromise.

Then there was the pretty little house on Long Island being rescued from the dust and darkness of years. Grahame and Joan spent most of their week-ends there planning, rearranging, and getting ready for speedy occupancy. Nancy occasionally went with them and gave what advice they needed.

"I should like my mother's room turned into a nursery," Grahame once said to Nancy in his direct way. "If we do not have children of our own we'll adopt them. Joan and I have decided on that."

"Beginning to weaken already?" Nancy flung back at him. "Oh! you of little faith. Hear him, Joan?"

"Yes, I heard. Of course there must be children—

of some kind." Joan's face was turned away. "I must have that talk with Grandy," she thought, apropos of —what? Her life, falling so easily into a natural and normal one, surprised Joan more than anything else. She really had formed no definite idea as to what her life was to be with Grahame—so naturally had their love and faith grown that when it drifted into the pleasant channels of business and home-making it caused no ripple; it merely gained purpose and strength. Nothing that existed before seemed to have anything to do with it, and it was only when the past tapped on the closed door that Joan paused and tried to remember.

That look in Patricia's eyes was one of the taps; an occasional remark about Norman Grey was a very distinct one; and this reference to children—another. "I must have a talk with Grandy!" Again and again Joan reminded herself of that, and then a wave of new duties, a growing consciousness of her utter happiness, made her deaf to the tapping.

It was quite naturally that the talk with Patricia came about, however, and it was brought about through an indirect channel.

Having an hour or so to spare after a day with Nancy and before she met Grahame to go home to Long Island, Joan went unexpectedly to Patricia's, fearing that she might find her out. But Patricia was at home. She was lying down on a couch in her bedroom and the look of transparency struck Joan anew.

"You are quite well, Grandy?" she asked.

"Quite, my dear, but remember, at my age time counts against, not for, me. When I am going out in the evening I rest in the afternoon."

"We must be oftener together, Grandy, just you and I." A little tapping on the closed door!

"Only when you really want that, Joan. I am not so far gone that I can accept sacrifices. I can imagine nothing more humiliating to one's pride than that—and pride has enduring qualities in some people."

"Grandy, darling, do not let us drift into talky talk —not you and I."

Patricia's hand trembled a little as she put it out toward Joan.

Suddenly Joan asked, firing from an unexpected quarter, "Grandy, where is Norman Grey?"

"On an extended Western trip, Joan. His people keep him away from that deplorable wife of his as much as possible."

"I'm glad he's away"—Joan looked relieved—"but when he returns it will not greatly matter. I wanted you to know, Grandy, I do not think you have ever quite understood how I feel."

"Perhaps not, dear child." And then Patricia glanced across the room to her desk upon which lay two letters, one from Margot and one from Norman Grey, dated from San Francisco. The latter frankly asked for money. Grey was ill; had many demands, etc. It was carefully worded, but it suggested screws for the first time. Margot's letter dealt with one ever-recurring question: "And what about Miss Joan?"

"Perhaps not, dear child!" again Patricia said.

Joan was nervously conscious of a withdrawing on Patricia's part. She must prevent that, the talk *must* be now. "Grandy—there are things to be said."

Patricia did not speak.

"I suppose," Joan looked away from Patricia, "I suppose it all began, this feeling between us, with the baby! Had it lived things would have been simpler; I had worked it all out, but when the baby died we thought we buried it, but we did not bury it deep enough. Even at this late day we must face certain things, mustn't we, dear?"

Patricia leaned back and folded her hands on her breast. "My dear," was all she could say.

"Grandy, you and Margot were wonderful to me. I shall never cease to be grateful, but it was and *is* my problem. You must try to understand this."

"Have I failed to understand it, Joan? Perhaps you are taking too much for granted."

Joan flushed. "I think not. Now I feel sure you are wondering all the time if I have told Ken, believing that I owed it to him. I don't grant that I owed him that, but had there been time I meant to tell him; not because of any right of his, but because I wanted to show him how entirely I trusted him. Grandy—you do not know Ken as I do."

Patricia was rallying some of her old force. "My dear," she said gravely, "I would believe that more intelligently if you *had* told him. I gather that you have not. Men, the finest, wisest, and best of them, have recoils and reactions that women cannot possibly comprehend until they come frankly up against them. I've seen several unexpected revolts in my time."

Joan's face flushed and paled. "I trust Ken as I—as I trust God," she whispered.

"That has nothing to do with what I mean," Patricia went on quietly. "Even God is estimated by one's in-

dividual knowledge of Him gained by full and open——"

"I suppose you are thinking of Mary Magdalene?" Joan broke into the silence that fell when Patricia ceased speaking, with tear-wet eyes and flushed cheeks.

"No, Joan!"—this came sternly—"you must not talk like that to—me."

"Forgive me, Grandy." Then: "The opportunity for full confidence with Ken was taken from me, Grandy. You remember?"

"Yes, my dear, I remember."

"Since then—well, truly I have hardly thought of it, and I confess that now it would be awkward. Not because of any of the old, stupid superstitions but—can't you see, dear?"

"Yes, I think I can see, but will time make the situation easier?"

"It may blot it out, Grandy."

Patricia thought of Grey's return and that possible danger; she thought of Margot and her stern revolt, and she said: "Time rarely does that, Joan. More likely it turns an unexpected trick when least we are prepared for the thrust. I like this husband of yours—I hadn't expected to—but I do. You are the one last and deep love of my life, Joan, I want only your happiness." For a moment, watching Joan's sensitive face, the nervous twitching of her lips, Patricia contemplated bringing little Bethan into the tangled trouble, but she did not! She could not bring herself even now to that. If Joan refused to tell Grahame she would, in some way, get Margot away. In the last analysis Patricia meant

to protect Joan. Margot must go, and there must be a large check sent to Grey!

"I'm very tired, Joan. I am sure you will do what is right, my dear; but remember this, I read it somewhere lately, in this tangle of life we get to thinking that men, women, things are greater, stronger than God. They are not—they are His tools. Forever and forever they bide His will."

"Grandy!" Joan bent over Patricia and put her arms around her. "I've tired you and what has it all amounted to?"

"What, indeed, except that you seem a bit more like my girl again."

"Just because you know that I have kept from Ken something that you think I should have told him?"

"No, because I feel sure, Joan, that you are going to see things straight and when you do—everything will fall into line."

"What faith you have, Grandy."

"It matches yours, my dear. Go now, I must rest. Give my love to Ken."

"You are sending me away, Grandy. I feel like a naughty child ordered from the room."

"Only for rest time, darling."

Alone, Patricia sat up, then walked to a chair and sat down. "I think she will tell Ken," she reflected; "there will be readjustment, for Ken is too keen about her to let her drift from him now. I hope she will not leave it too long. Margot and I will go away—for most of the time; living abroad will be best for me and it will recompense Margot." After another weary pause Patricia thought on. Planning, planning. "In time it

would not be so bad—the child *is* like Joan; I might begin again. Then when I came back here Joan's and Ken's children——" But Patricia was forgetting that God and life have times and ways of their own, there isn't much leeway for any of us. She closed her eyes, remembering what she had just told Joan. She was tired, desperately tired.

To Joan that talk with Patricia took on wider and deeper dimensions as the days passed. It had seemed so futile, so baffling at the time, but it kept recurring and assuming importance. "Of course, I must have this out with Ken," she decided, and then came to a standstill. "At first, when I had expected to tell him, it would have been simple enough"—Joan believed this to be true—"but now, even when he remembers that there was no opportunity, it is bound to be awkward and, after all, what is to be gained?" There did not seem to be any possible gain and that opened a new line of defense for silence. If anything had been going to happen it would have happened. Joan was thinking of Norman Grey.

With this Joan again tried to let the matter rest for a while. She and Grahame were so happy, so busy. It was the happiness of this busy life that thrilled Joan. The sweet, wild love of their first weeks together might so easily have faded when put to this test of work, absence, and occasional breaks of tired nerves, unless it had been what it really was, a great, an abiding passion.

Nothing marred the reality of what they both knew and rested upon; they could fling little jests at each other, criticize each other, too, but the foundation never was affected. Playful thrusts and serious criticisms simply made the real thing vibrate safely. "All the

same," Joan reflected with an inclination often to laugh hysterically, "it would be"—she did not now say "it will be"—"rather a brutal interruption and so utterly useless."

She and Grahame had a little passage of arms now and then. Often when he was late in the morning and was hurrying for his train she would call: "Oh, Ken! I meant to tell you——" and Grahame would call back, a hint of impatience in his tone:

"Pertinent or impertinent? If the former I'll wait, if not we'll have it this evening."

"This is—which?" Joan was again thinking of the baffling thing she might some day think best to tell Grahame. It became a skeleton presently, and rattled its bones hideously from its closet, no matter how radiant the moment might be with Grahame. Then when their few happy evenings came, in which they were alone and Grahame, discarding all the trappings of the business man, became the lover of the moors, Joan from the safe shelter of his arms would try and frame a confession. It had become a confession; no longer was it a confidence.

"Ken, after all this time I have something to tell you."

"Pertinent—or impertinent?"

How ghastly to introduce into such a mood the grisly skeleton safely locked away. Then the bones would rattle as Joan thought on, clinging closer to Grahame. "You recall, Ken—it wasn't possible to tell you at the time. Your accident, you know, and after—and now!" That would pave the way. Ken would be sure to understand.

The secret began to wear upon Joan. She seemed to think of it all the time.

"You are working too hard, darling!" Grahame cautioned at last. "Remember, dear, we're on the long home stretch, not the moors, now. Do not go into town to-day. Keep to the garden—a garden is such a solution."

For all the new codes and greater freedom, Joan was forced day by day to acknowledge that some things do not greatly change or had not as yet greatly changed. It seemed, the more she thought of it, to be as impossible for her to tell Grahame about Norman Grey and the baby that had died as it would for Patricia to have told her lover. The more she thought of it the more she realized that since she herself could not understand how she had been led to do what she had done, she could hardly hope to make Grahame understand. It seemed the act of a strange woman in whom neither she nor Grahame had any real interest. Why discuss it with him?

Thus waged the world-old struggle of conscience and expediency. Which *was* conscience; which expediency? And at heart Joan was honest.

About this time Patricia, too, worried Joan. She never referred to their talk. The wall of silence had been reënforced rather than eliminated by it. What Patricia was suffering and fearing on one side was not communicated to Joan on hers. They felt guilty when together and made exaggerated attempts to ignore it. Joan could not endure the strain. She suddenly thought of a possible solution. "Suppose we run up to Maine," she suggested to Patricia one day; "you and I seem a

little run down. I've had Margot on my mind for a long time. What do you say, darling?"

Patricia, for a moment, could say nothing. She was appalled. Then, after a pause, she rushed rather heedlessly into explanations and excuses. "Impossible, Joan! I may go to—to North Carolina or somewhere else, but not to that desolate farm. Besides, if you have any love and consideration for me—or, or Margot, do not reopen an old wound!"

"Why, Grandy! please, please stop. You are excited. Of course, since you put it this way, I will not go to Margot ever, nor ask you to go. I thought perhaps a good three-sided talk might help us all. Margot has such marvelous open spaces in her mind." Joan was patting Patricia's hand, comforting her and, at the same time, resenting her attitude.

Patricia controlled herself presently and gathered the tatters of her dignity about her. She was afraid of herself. She had let herself go too far with Norman Grey, with Margot, and now with Joan. Unless she were more careful she might destroy all that she had, through the years, worked for.

"I am as nervous as a witch, Joan," she spoke more quietly now. "I am ashamed, but I cannot bear to look back to—to that time on the farm. I feel that Margot should be spared, too, Joan. Besides—" here Patricia went more slowly—"besides, Margot is planning to return to her childhood home—Scotland. As we grow old we drift back to our beginnings, you know."

This surprised Joan; it surprised Patricia, too, but now that the idea was formulated she must beg, com-

pel, if necessary, Margot to conform to it; at any time Joan might go to Maine!

"Don't you think, Grandy," Joan said, "that I should see Margot or communicate with her? I shall always love her."

"You'd better write, Joan, and leave it to Margot to say whether she wants you to visit her or not."

This was a master stroke.

"I will, Grandy. Of course, I have written, but not lately. I sent her some things from Scotland, too."

And so it rested. Later Patricia said that after all she would not go away at once, but would plan to go to Italy later. "Rome," she added, "is such a wonderful place to drop troubles in and lose a sense of responsibility."

"Grandy, you worry me!" Joan broke in.

"You must not worry, Joan. I must have my little joke. All the same, Rome does overpower me and at the same time it revives me." But Patricia seemed in no hurry to plan her trip.

Nancy Holt, at this time, proved a great help. She saw the strain growing between Patricia and Joan and attributed it to the wrong cause. "Oh! these possessive relatives," she thought, and, at the same time, she sympathized with Patricia. Joan was so "terribly married" it *was* trying. Nancy herself had moments of resentment. Joan did not exactly flaunt her ecstatic state in the faces of her friends, but she reflected it too often. "It's not like the direct rays of her sun," Nancy confided to Patricia, "it's like the rays cast by a bit of glass. Let's dodge, Aunt Pat, before we get burned. I'll try to go to Italy with you. The firm has got to restock,

even if one of the partners has settled in Paradise." Nancy could always make Patricia laugh.

But Nancy did not go to Italy for several years. For the moment she had her hands full. What with Patricia and Roland and Roland's mother and the business, she felt as though she were juggling with several balls in the air. With all her hungry soul she was again longing for John Welling. His long silence was unbroken. It was final! Accepting that, Nancy began to wonder if it were? That is, suppose she gave way, compromised—in that case would it be final? On the other hand, ought she not do something definite about Roland? The subterfuge of bookkeeping was not fair. Nancy knew it. But she could not face that time on ahead when her days would be filled with work—work, and there would be no eager-eyed man at the end of them to take her out to dinner! How could Roland keep that eager look? What was he feeding upon?

At this stage Nancy kept close to Patricia and Mrs. Roland—they were so safe and responsive. Roland was always delighted when Nancy went to his mother's or included his mother in week-ends, but sometimes he asked, when Nancy veered in another direction, "Mrs. Henley's again, Nan?"

"I must, Ted, she's growing to depend upon me and I'm keen about older women, you know." Then: "Let us have dinner with your mother to-morrow night, shall we? My party! We'll have it in my house for variety and I'll have Aunt Pat."

Roland had the grace to laugh. "Why not the entire crowd?" he suggested.

"By the way, Corlyss Trent or Martin or whatever

her name happens to be just now, keeps calling me up, suggesting that in the guise of an old friend I take her here, there, and everywhere."

"I refuse to enter into competition with Corlyss, Ted."

"So do I, Nan." This rather grimly. Then: "Why not have Joan and her man? I like Grahame. He and Joan are restoring some fine old traditions of love, family, and home."

"Ted, you nauseate me. I'm trying to eliminate Joan occasionally."

"I'm not going to ask you to marry me, Nan. Don't put your armor on." Roland looked far, far too cheerful.

"You've ruined my appetite for dinner, anyway. I cannot face Aunt Pat in this state," Nancy blurted out.

"Then perhaps you'll try chasing up an appetite down on Long Island?" Roland looked hopeful.

"All right, if you take the south side instead of the north side. I don't want to interrupt the bliss of the Grahames."

"We won't!"

And on that ride Nancy tried to square herself with herself. "After all, it was Ted's lookout." Undoubtedly it was. "All women are not for marriage!" This did not help matters along much. "Nor all men, either!" She glanced at Roland. Then: "Though some think they are!" Again Nancy's imagination leaped ahead to the time when she might be eating lonely meals, no one caring where she ate or what. Oh, why couldn't men be friends to women? Really friends?

"Tired, Nan?"

Unconsciously Nancy was leaning against Roland; he was driving. "No—only floppy."

"Lean heavily, Nan."

"Thanks, Ted. I'm quite capable of *not* leaning."

"I know you are." Then: "I wish to God you were not!"

"After all," thought Nancy, bracing herself against the outer edge of her seat, "this isn't entirely Ted's affair by a long, long shot."

CHAPTER XIX

AFTER that drive and dinner Nancy and Roland seemed to have started on a new lap of their life course. Roland had a more hopeful, genial outlook, though why he should have neither he nor Nancy knew—so they did not talk about it.

Nancy went oftener to Patricia Henley's and to Mrs. Roland's. Mrs. Roland was the more satisfying. Patricia was restless; thin and vague as to what she wanted to do. One week it was Italy; the next she contemplated taking an all-around-the-world trip. The truth was, Patricia dared not stir from home. She was on guard against Joan, Margot, and Norman Grey—Grey had come home and was reported as hopelessly sick. Patricia wanted to go and see him, but refrained.

Margot had refused to contemplate any move until she heard from Joan. There was a new and a strange note in Margot's words. Patricia was afraid she might come on to New York or call Joan to Maine. Joan's attitude toward Patricia was strange and puzzling; the manner that one assumes toward a sick person who must not be worried and who must be humored. "If Joan decides to go she will not tell me," Patricia thought; "she is keeping things from me."

Joan certainly was, but she had no idea of going to Maine. She was only too glad to take advantage of anything legitimate that might keep her from an in-

terview with Margot. She had definitely decided, at least she believed she had, to keep silent, now and forever. "It would be sheer folly to do otherwise," she thought, and proceeded to turn a deaf ear when her skeleton jangled his bones. She did this so often and so effectually that in time the sounds grew less and presently—ceased.

Joan was busy and again happy. Yes, she was happy! She repeated that to herself over and over. She spent many hours a week with Nancy and was more ornamental than ever at the studio teas. Grahame was not much of a society man, but he was so good-natured, so humorous and friendly, that everyone liked him. He would stride into Nancy's rooms as he used to stride over the moors. He suggested outdoors and plenty of room; he always opened windows as soon as he entered.

Corlyss Trent—she had assumed her maiden name—adored him. She had assumed, along with her maiden name, a silly lisp. She tried to be confidential with Grahame, she told him that she had endured hell and that he was the first man in ages who revived her belief in men.

Grahame guffawed at this; then patted Corlyss's arm and raised another window.

"You'll have us all blown into space," Nancy warned him.

"May I depend upon that?" he asked, and actually winked at Nancy.

And Nancy, holding Roland at arm's length but smiling at him over the distance, was arguing with herself concerning John Welling. Joan's happiness and success were constant irritants to Nancy. Such happiness as

Joan's *she* wanted, but if she had it it would mark failure, not success for her. Well, life was proving a failure for her, anyway, and ruining any future for Roland. Better go to Welling and know peace and joy on his terms. That would settle everything for Roland. He'd understand then just how unworthy she was and after that things would settle into shape. She *was* unworthy. Just cheating everyone, herself included, was not being moral and respectable! She wanted to have Welling's love and what protection he could offer; she did not go to him because she was a coward. Goodness did not hold her back. And so she battled.

In this mood one evening Nancy refused to go out with Roland. Instead, she remained in her office and attacked the pile of bills and letters that lay upon her desk—a mail had come in after Roland left that accounted for the bills being there. Nancy sorted the pile, putting the bills in a basket at her elbow and glanced at the letters. Suddenly she grew rigid. There was a letter from John Welling! Nancy tore open the envelope.

"I must see you. I am coming to New York at once."

"I—shall refuse to see him!" something in Nancy flared—and dimmed. She knew that she would see him and believed, had he entered at that moment, that she would go forth with him—anywhere. She breathed quick and hard. Something in her seemed to snap. Perhaps it was that snarl in her that would not let her do what she wanted to do.

And just then someone rattled the knob of the outer door. Sometimes the melodramatic is the most casual and natural thing that can happen. Only by melodrama

could certain things be impressed, and melodrama stood at Nancy's door.

Thinking it was the cleaning woman, Nancy called from the inner office: "Come in—I'm going soon." She did not turn, but began sorting more letters and bills, holding Welling's letter in her clenched left hand.

"I went to your house and then walked up here. Your windows——"

Nancy felt her blood chill and grow sluggish—then it turned to fire and leaped in her veins.

"John!" It would always be this way for them. A word, open arms, and a rush to the only place in the world that could give Nancy joy. Welling held her close and bent to press his lips against her hair. His face was grave and deeply lined; his eyes heavy with renunciation.

Then Nancy looked up. "John—what is it?" she cried.

"That's what I've come to tell you, my dear," he said. "I've come as soon as I could. Did you get a note from me?"

"Yes." The note dropped on the floor between them.

"Where can we go to talk?"

"Have you had dinner?" Nancy asked.

"Dinner?" Welling laughed. "When did I last eat? Oh, I had lunch on the train."

"Let's get to my house. I'll have something served upstairs in my rooms. No one will disturb us there."

An hour later Welling stretched his long legs before Nancy's fire in the small library off her bedroom. The trays had been removed; Nancy, in a soft gown and heelless slippers, sank into her deep chair. She was not

excited or afraid. She knew that there was no Rubicon to be crossed—just how she knew this she could not have told, but she knew it! She was curious but unhurried. It did not matter whether Welling stayed far into the night or not. Alone with him in her little private room she was as safe as if she were in the great drawing room below and sitting under the portrait of her grandfather. Something had happened.

"Just like old married folks," she said presently, and gave Welling an impish smile that tortured him.

"Don't, Nan," he pleaded. He knew the pain of one who sees a desired thing within his reach and realizes that he is paralyzed. "You see, darling, comic as it may appear, I'd like to be a—a damned scoundrel and I cannot! Ever feel that way?"

"Yes. It's the limit, isn't it, John?"

"I'm quite safe, Nan, quite, quite safe. So tell me. If I could be what I'd like to be and can't, would you come to me?"

"I don't know. When I had the chance—I—I couldn't. Lately I've been afraid I *would,* if I saw you. I did not mean to see you because of my fear and—and my longing for you, John. But what is it, dear boy, have I lost my—my appeal?" Nancy tried to smile but failed pitifully. She felt the tears rise and smart her eyes.

"Sweet—not that!"—Welling reached out to her—"but it's this way. My—wife has had a stroke. Sounds commonplace enough, doesn't it? She can hardly speak—one arm and one leg useless—and she's only thirty-eight."

Nancy's eyes widened. Somewhere, off in her bewild-

ered mind, she saw hope gleam among shadows, she felt like a murderess and dropped her eyes.

"I know, Nan—that was my first thought, too, God help me! But I know now that it isn't to be. I was away from home when it happened, but the children sent for me—Elaine, the older one, is thirteen. They know nothing. Elaine simply turned to me—she was almost frightened to death. I went at once, naturally. It isn't merely a stroke, Nan, she might recover from that, but the mind is going, too. There may be, more than probably will be—years and years and years. The children, Nan, you do understand?"

"Yes, I understand!" Then: "John, I'm ready now for anything I can do for you." The snarl in Nancy's nature unwound like a released spring. All the world was as nothing compared to this urge for soul, body, life service. "I'm quite ready, dear——"

But Welling shook his head. "I'd even thought of that, too, dear girl, but you see something is dead in me—the sight of my little girls killed it. I've often wondered what men felt like who, believing themselves freed from old ties, marriage and all that, and who, having created a new setting, suddenly hear of, or see, the other woman—the wife, you know, in dire want or illness, alone, poverty-stricken or helpless? A man once told me that his wife, after long years, begged of him in the street, not knowing him. Lord! Nan, it's come to me like a lurid flash, the something that goes into marriage—and sticks!

"When I saw my wife, stricken, helpless, and speechless, when I saw her frightened, pleading look turned on me and then on the—the children, it was as if she were

waiting to see whether I was going to kill them all, then and there! I know, dear, some men might be able to argue the thing out and get a pretty decent answer that would satisfy their souls and—and their desires, but I cannot, Nan. Heaven help me, I cannot! She will last and last. As her body accepts the inevitable her mind will slowly decay. No matter how damnable it may be, how little she will be able to comprehend, there will be the children watching, insisting that I do not fail them.

"Nan, when you refused the last time I saw you to go with me, you turned me to my plain duty. Can you understand?"

Never before had Nancy so well understood him or herself. That Something, in them both, had been the strong tie. They were alike; creatures born of conflicting emotions; torn and tempted, but clinging to the one inheritance common to them both—simple decency.

Slowly Nancy got up—paused, then sat on the arm of Welling's chair. She drew his head to her bosom; she bent and kissed his tired eyes. "I shall always be your friend, John," she whispered, "your friend and a friend to your little girls. I'll be a good friend, you need not fear me."

"Beloved! But, Nan—you should marry. You should cut the tie that holds us. You were meant for love, for children, and a home. I always knew that—dreamed of giving them all to you, even when we played the hardest. Queer—wasn't it?"

"No—beautiful, John. And I dreamed, too. But you would not want me to marry, would you?"

Had he said "yes" it would have hurt her cruelly.

"I'm thinking only of you, my darling. I have no longer any rights." Then: "Poor, defrauded little Nan!"

"No, no!" Nancy cried, "it's queer, but I never felt less defrauded. Neither you nor I could fail a helpless woman and little children. As things might have been, I could not stand close to you and to them. As things are—I can. Do you not see, John, I have what so easily might have been lost?"

"Dearest—we might fail——"

"I am not afraid, John—not now."

How strange it was to have him lean upon her and still not be afraid! How like a terrible and grim trick it was to know that there was nothing to be afraid of. The clock struck eleven.

"I must go, Nan dearest."

"Must you? You can stay here." It did not matter; nobody would object!

"I'm taking the midnight train back to St. Paul."

"You'll write to me, John?"

"Every few days, Nan." Welling got up and kissed Nancy, turned to the door and was gone.

Nancy tried to sleep after Welling left. It was her impulse always to reduce, outwardly at least, her emotions to normal in the hope that her mind and body would take the hint. She lay quite rigid in her bed while her mind spun rapidly and threw off sparks in every direction. What had happened between her and Welling? It was something over which neither of them apparently had any control. It had taken all the danger —the exciting, soul-touching danger, from their contact. It wouldn't have mattered in the least had Welling remained overnight in her home! She could have ex-

plained it quite simply to the servants in the morning! It was as if they had both grown old and uncaring in the vital, breath-taking way. They had become friends! Life had performed an operation upon them—they were friends, not lovers. Every sense was deadened by the opiate that life had somehow provided while the strange and cruel thing had been done! But as she lay there like a live-dead woman Nancy knew that the ache, the hunger, and loneliness would come to her senses in time. After the effect of the drug wore off! She was now a *friend!* She, Nancy of the vagrant and daring passions —just a friend! After a while Welling would write to her, see her. He would bring his little girls to her—she had told him he might. They might learn to love her now, their father's friend. They might call her Aunt Nancy—and it wouldn't make her laugh.

Down deep in Nancy's heart was a queer feeling of gladness that in very truth those children could learn to care for her. She had hovered close enough to ways that might have set her apart forever from them; if they knew about those months in Italy, Switzerland, could they believe her, trust her? Perhaps by and by when she had been their friend for years—their friend, their father's friend, their *mother's friend,* perhaps then they would believe and defend her with their young love and faith.

Nancy gave a little moan. She would be old, old by that time and might need their defense. In the meantime she must learn to be a friend. A friend! At that moment Nancy began to cry. The tears ran down her cheeks and wet the pillow—she cried on.

"I wish—" she murmured, "I wish I hadn't been so

—so hard. I might have had the substance to remember —not the shadow." But she wished it as the old, the safely old do—and she knew it.

And then morning came. Nancy watched it from her bedroom window. It was a foggy morning—mystery everywhere. The tall tower near by was hidden from the base up to the dial of the great clock. The lighted clock showed time in the fogs. Four o'clock, five, six, and then daylight pushed the fog away, little by little.

Nancy's taut nerves were to endure another strain before the day's end.

On reaching her office she found a slip of paper on her desk. "Please call Caledonia 6231." That was the Grey number.

It was Norman Grey's mother who answered Nancy's call. "My dear, could you come up here as soon as possible?" Mrs. Grey was always intimately confiding over the telephone, and business hours for women, at least, had no meaning for her.

"Why——" Nancy paused. Something unusual must have occurred. Then: "Is it important, dear Mrs. Grey?" One must follow suit even if nerves were tingling and business tugged.

"Very, my dear. Norman is seriously ill. He wants to see you. I would not impose unless it were very urgent."

"Of course. I'll come at once." Nancy taxied up and in a half hour reached the quiet, dignified old home. The same old servant opened the door, the same old furniture met her eyes. Some things were static; the thought rested her.

Mrs. Grey came to her at once. Nancy, gazing upon the slim, dainty lady, realized that she had never seen

Mrs. Grey otherwise than old and stately and ghostly. Like a dear portrait of A Lady. Had she always been a friend or had she once—thrilled? Nancy had a mad inclination to laugh. She must overcome that.

"You see, Nancy, my dear"—Mrs. Grey sat down close to Nancy and spoke evenly, quietly—"Norman has been very ill in San Francisco. His father and I were about to start westward when, quite without warning, he arrived last week."

"Is his wife here?" Nancy could hardly have told why she asked that.

"She was, my dear. She has gone—I—I think for good!" No passion stirred the calm of the frail face, but the voice trembled. "You and others know so much, my dear, that I can afford to—to tell you this. She—my son's wife, came at once. We sent for her. I think we disturbed some engagement of hers—she was quite, quite irrational. She saw Norman for a few moments and then came down to us. We were waiting in the library. I do not want to—to condemn any woman, Nancy, my dear, there is always *some* explanation, but alas! there is not always time to search it out. Laurine is very outspoken; she leaves nothing to imagination. She felt she could not devote her life—her young life, she said—to an invalid husband unless—" Mrs. Grey's voice broke, but she bravely went on—"unless she was paid well. She set a very high figure. Higher than one would suppose she would care to name."

Nancy's anger rose. "Beast!" she muttered. "And what did Mr. Grey say?" she asked.

"My husband really could not deal with the situation at that point," Mrs. Grey went on. "Men are always so

businesslike—they get muddled when business and lesser things confuse them. It was I who dealt with the situation. I told Laurine that under no circumstances would I trust my son to her now. I—I was quite willing to—to take him back. I would give her a certain sum if she would sign a paper releasing us all from future claims. Of course there was an unpleasant scene, but in the end—it was near midnight—we got our old lawyer friend here and the—the deal, Laurine called it—went through. My boy is in his old room now; he's glad to be home again."

Nancy knelt beside the slim, dignified figure—there seemed nothing else on earth to do but kneel to it. Mrs. Grey's hand, soft and crumpled, rested upon Nancy's head. The old eyes were dry, but there was a light in them like a candle flaming in the window of an empty house—a beacon for wayfarers.

"Norman has been a bit feverish all night—the doctor has been here three times, the boy is quieter now. He has asked for you repeatedly. I tried to make him understand that it was quite unnecessary, but he insists and I am sorry to interrupt your plans, Nancy child, but in such a case a friend, you know——"

"Yes—dear Mrs. Grey. You did just right. What *are* friends for unless——"

Norman was asleep when Nancy sat down beside his bed. Mrs. Grey drifted silently from the room. The old room bore traces of Norman's years from childhood to manhood. It was like a patteran. Banners and trophies, dance cards and tipsy-looking wine bottles hanging by their necks. Pictures of girls; an enshrined bust of his

mother, a gift from his father that had been placed there on Grey's twenty-first birthday.

The white, calm face looked down now on the battered and wasted form on the bed. "I do wish I could stop wanting to cry!" Nancy thought.

Then Grey opened his eyes. The tired brain struggled to readjust itself—the sunken eyes wavered, held, and the senses steadied.

"Bully old Nan!" The voice was familiar. Then, as if there were vital need of hurry, Grey plunged on—gasping a little, his voice rising and falling.

"I'm done for! The mater won't give in. Dad and Laurine sensed the truth. Dad has stiffened for the finals. Laurine has—skipped. It's plain sailing from now on, Nan." Then: "I've seen Joan. I've been hanging about town for a couple of weeks—don't let Mother know that. I wanted to get a few strings in my own hands before I made a landing—I've been *here* a week. I saw Laurine—off guard. She'll never know I saw her. I had to be sure. I saw Joan—twice—coming from her grandmother's. Once I walked behind her all the way to your office—she never knew, either. Lord! Nan—she's happy!"

"Aren't you glad, Norman?"

"Glad—yes—but——"

"Norman—did you love Joan, really, I mean?"

"Yes. I didn't know it for a long time. I always liked her—wanted her—you know how I mean, Nan. I've told you. She *got* me, got under the skin, but I know now that it was love. Yes—I'm glad she's happy, but when a man's dying—no use to shake your head, Nan, I'm a goner—when a man has no personal hold, it's

queer how he feels about women. It's then that he understands. It came to me like a blow from a blunt weapon. Because I loved Joan I've played the damn fool part all along. Laurine, then drink, I've even sunk to—to drugs. You see—a better sort would have gone up, not down. Love acts both ways."

"Yes—yes, Norman. Now then, don't get excited. There's no hurry. I'll come often. We'll run this serially, old man."

Grey grinned—the cold sweat in little beads was on his forehead. "Good stuff, Nan. Serially. You mean that?"

"Of course, Norman."

"You mean you'll come, off and on—you'll let me—talk? You'll tell me things and when the—the climax comes you'll stand by?"

"Exactly! Now lie back, Norman, or they'll keep me from you. We'll have to work this thing on the sly."

That night Roland found Nancy huddled in her chair, her head upon her folded arms on the desk. He touched her on the shoulder and she started up.

"I've been asleep," she said; "petered out."

"Come to dinner," Roland said gravely.

"Perhaps it is starvation." Nancy got up slowly. "I haven't eaten since breakfast. I really don't know, Ted, whether I have a backache or a tummyache."

"We'll soon find out."

Then Nancy stiffened. "Ted," she said, and her voice sounded hollow, "I cannot go unless you understand finally, eternally, honestly, that it is as a friend I go!"

"Rot!" muttered Roland. "Here's your coat."

"I mean it, Ted. The rest—has been amputated."

"You're nutty, Nan. I guess it's starvation, right enough."

As they jogged along in a taxi Nancy said intermittently: "I really need the mountains—I want Deep Woods as I never wanted it before. Think of the trees —snow-covered—the trails unbroken."

"Let's run up there, Nan!" Roland looked inspired, but Nancy laughed. "Why not?" Roland asked.

"Lord, Ted, spare me! I wish you could understand without a surgical operation. Ted—it hurts to be made suddenly into a friend. It hurts damnably." Then: "Where are we going, Ted?"

"Over to my mother's, Nan."

And suddenly the thought of the quiet room on Brooklyn Heights, the memory of the unasking, undemanding mother overcame Nancy. "Lord! I'm crying again," she whispered, and turned her face away.

CHAPTER XX

EVENTS, like drifting logs, often get jammed in mid-channel. Everyone knows that something will dislodge them. A well-placed charge of dynamite or the spring freshets, but for the time being they seem solid enough to trust one's weight upon.

Norman Grey was dying—everyone but his mother knew that—but he was taking his time about it. Like a tired boy, home after a strenuous course of instruction, he lay in his bed in the old familiar room and waited.

To every inquiry old Mrs. Grey would say, cheerfully, "Gaining day by day." She was so happy to have her boy again. Her *little* boy.

Old Mr. Grey visited his son and brought the day's news to him, then walked away to the library and stared into the heart of the fire on the hearth until he dozed off.

Nancy worked with furious energy at the office. She kept Joan at it, too, as much as she could. Only when Grahame sternly claimed her would Nancy let her go.

"You're merciless, Nancy," Grahame said, "to yourself and everyone else. I warn you—but keep your hands off Joan!"

Nancy gave Joan a side glance; would she accept this position of dominated woman?

Joan gave one of her radiant smiles.

"Oh, Lord!" thought Nancy, "she does not even suspect to what depths she has sunk or—to what heights she has attained. Which?"

"Nan, you're sprinting for a fall," Joan was saying; "slow down."

"I'm going to. Ted's mother is going up to Deep Woods with me. Two little girls, children of an old friend, are coming, too. Winter sports, you know. Sports!"

"Whose children, Nan?" Joan was interested.

"The Welling youngsters. Haven't you ever heard me speak of John Welling?"

Joan shook her head.

"Well, I must have. He lives in St. Paul. I met the—the Wellings abroad. The wife is seriously ill. I've offered to take the children, and Mrs. Roland is going to look after them; do the things for them that I might not know how to do."

"How splendid!" Joan was excited.

Grahame was watching Nancy with curious eyes—finally he smiled. The smile did Nancy good. She kept remembering it long after Grahame and Joan left. "He'd understand and believe," she thought. "Queer, how a sudden look or smile betrays one."

Patricia Henley, as she put it, "was holding her breath," and waiting. If Norman Grey died without taking anyone into his confidence, why perhaps it *was* a wise course that Joan had decided upon. Margot might be difficult to handle, but if they lived together, Margot, Bethan, and she, why that might be managed. A child of Margot's! An adopted child. The impossible once again assumed a possible aspect. Still Patricia felt

she must stand her ground until Norman Grey was past making trouble.

Recently Patricia had had a strange bit of talk with Joan. "You have decided against taking Ken into your confidence?" she asked boldly.

"I've decided nothing, Grandy. I will not accept the position of material witness against anything I've done —and be held up! You may not understand this, but if it became a natural thing for me to tell Ken I could do it quite easily, but to suddenly blurt the fact out to him would be brutal and stupid."

"Quite, my dear. What I was going to say is this: I am beginning to see the wisdom of your course. To hurt a great happiness——"

"I do not agree that it would hurt, Grandy," Joan interrupted.

"It might be dislodged," Patricia hinted.

"Not even that!" Joan raised her head proudly. "If I thought that, Grandy, I'll tell him at once all there is to be told."

After Joan went away Patricia thought: "I wonder? I wonder? In that lie all the differences and similarities. I wonder!"

Winter passed and spring came. Norman Grey lingered on—a mere shadow of his former self; but his mother's eyes were holden, she could only see her little boy. Little Brother, she called him, going back to the old, old days when Norman had longed for, prayed for, a little brother.

Joan and Kenneth Grahame made a hurried trip to Europe that summer.

"I'll do some buying for you, Nan," Joan had suggested; "Ken loves that kind of a vacation."

This relieved Nancy greatly. She needed restocking, but the little Welling girls were still at Deep Woods with Mrs. Roland and she could not put the ocean between them and her. She and Ted often went up for week-ends. It was "Uncle Ted" and "Aunt Nancy" now. John Welling, with two trained nurses, was watching the children's mother "gain bodily and sink mentally." It was a hideous sight. Welling wrote almost daily to Nancy, and once he came to New York to see her.

"I wonder if you know what you *are* doing?" he asked, his haggard eyes clinging to her little dark face.

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"I'm plugging on—blindfolded."

"So am I—but I'm feeling about as I plug."

"Nan, do you ever touch anything—anything solid, I mean?"

"No, but I know it is there."

"How, Nan? How do you know?"

"I cannot tell you. But I know."

"I wish to God I did."

"Keep on plugging, John. You'll know some day."

Whenever she could, Nancy went to sit by Norman Grey; her days were full with the duties of a friend.

"Lord!" Grey confided to her once, "what an endless time it takes to die."

"Think of your mother, Norman. She does not see you as dying. You've come back to her; she's got you in a wonderful way. I do not think she has ever been happier."

Norman reflected upon this, then asked: "When will Joan be back?"

"Early in October. Why, Norman?"

"I—I like to hear about her. Queer, isn't it? I like to think of her having a great old time, but I'll be glad when she comes back."

Nancy humored this mood of Grey's as one does a sick man's mood. He had so little to interest and amuse him. If Joan and her doings could hold his attention and make him forget his own tangles and helplessness, she was willing to encourage him. She had never taken seriously his confession of love for Joan. "Norman is a pitiful mixture of sentimentality and common sense," she once amazed Roland by saying. Then added: "There's a kind of strength, too, underlying his weakness. He might strike a hurting blow if he were once to be set free from his complex of inferiority and egoism."

But now Grey, wasted and weary, seemed incapable of contemplating or aiming a blow. Still, his attitude toward his own condition often confirmed Nancy in her estimate of him. Grey had let go without struggle or apparent anxiety. There was a touch of humor, too, in his moods at times. "Crumbs from rich men's tables," he called Nancy's bits of gossip, and once he nearly broke his mother's calm by requesting that she sing him to sleep.

"And what shall I sing, my dear?" she asked.

"Sing that classic, 'I'm afraid to go home in the dark.' "

Mrs. Grey shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I do not know it, dear."

Grey patted her hand. "Then any old thing," he pleaded, "only sing and leave the light on."

In October Joan returned and plunged into the work of settling the Long Island house. She had faithfully fulfilled Nancy's commission; there seemed to be nothing that she had forgotten, and her energy and vitality were marvelous. Once, after a conference in the office, Nancy said:

"Norman Grey is about at the end of his rope."

Joan's eyes flickered, then grew grave and calm. "Poor old Norman," she faltered. Then: "Does he see many of his friends now, Nan?"

"He sees practically no one but his people and me. Ted and Bob Martin drop in now and then, but they bore him; he says he'll ask when he wants company. He's rather difficult to manage. He will not have a nurse, and Mrs. Grey is worn out."

"That seems a pity." Joan paused. Then: "If he ever should ask to see me, Nan, I'd go gladly."

"I'll remember that, Joan. Sometimes men forget—sometimes they don't."

"I imagine Norman forgot long ago any emotion he ever had for me, Nan." There was relief in Joan's tone, not pique.

"I hope he has." Nan turned to her work. She felt relieved—Norman sometimes made her doubt Joan.

"It *is* good to stretch one's feet to one's own fire!" Grahame exclaimed one night soon after their return. Outside the wind howled lustily. It was an ocean wind. By listening one could hear the beat of surf across the golf links.

"Home is wonderful, isn't it, Ken? Something so good to come back to."

Suddenly Grahame said: "Don't you wish we had children, Joan?"

Joan came to him and nestled close. "Yes, Ken, I do. Lately I've wondered if this is a hurting thing to you—our not having children?"

"Hardly hurting, dear, just a natural craving."

"We once spoke of adopting children, Ken."

"I know, but not just yet. I must overcome a suddenly realized inhibition." Grahame laughed.

"Which one?" Joan asked.

"A feeling against another man's child. I don't know how I could bear seeing you caring for—loving another man's child."

"Why, Ken!" Joan raised her head and looked at him.

"Rather cranky, isn't it, Joan?"

"It will bear thinking about," Joan said, and settled back.

"Men are damned funny about that kind of thing," Grahame went on.

"Are they? I think women get a real thrill in making a success of what might be a seeming failure, and little children are so responsive."

"I know, dear. I dare say I could get over my hurdle and be perfectly content in time. There is, as you say, something so responsive about a helpless little child. After a time I suppose it would be simply the child that would matter and the joy of the success."

"Yes, Ken."

And that night Joan did not sleep well. She heard

the thudding of the sea against the sea wall, she thought of Margot, the farm, and wondered where the tiny grave was in which lay a little child—her little child. "Some day I'll go and find out," Joan thought. "I would like to know. I will not go until Grandy goes on a trip. I suppose she cannot bear to look back—but I have to! I could make Margot understand." But Joan was thinking, through all this, of Grahame.

It was not long after this that Grahame said something else to Joan that gave her food for thought She had been impatient over some trifling thing about the house and had flown into a senseless fit of temper.

"Why, Joan," Grahame exclaimed, and laughed as he might at an unruly child, "I did not think you could so lose your sense of proportion."

"There's a lot we do not know about each other, Ken. Sometimes it frightens me," Joan retorted.

Grahame grew serious at once. He had noted for days Joan's pallor and the dark circles under her eyes. He put his hands on her shoulders and looked calmly into her troubled eyes. "Perhaps we know more than we think we do, darling." Then: "Now, for instance, I know that chap, Norman Grey, who is dying—loved you once, perhaps does now!"

"Ken, how did you know that?" Joan's eyes did not fall; they simply flickered.

"As one does know things, Joan. I hated to think you felt that I would care. I would not want you to think that I would not understand, that is all."

"But *I* never loved him, Ken. That would have made a difference."

"If you had loved him, my dear, you probably would

have told me. You would have gone to see him. Since you did not, you did not think it of enough importance to talk about. I only want you to understand that I'm not curious, but always interested."

"You are wonderful, Ken. It seems heartless, perhaps, but Norman Grey means nothing to me; if he wanted to see me I would go at once. Nancy knows this."

After that little talk Joan grew more restive. All she had said was true, utterly true, and yet as always it made things harder to explain—that one thing! She was weaving a close net about herself and yet it *was true* about Norman Grey. Except as a sad, dying creature, he meant nothing to her. Nothing! And some day she must break through the net of silence and actual fact and must say, "He was the father of my little dead child." Of course Grahame could not understand; he might not be able to believe her about never having loved Norman. The two statements did not hold together—but they were true! And then it was that Joan began first to feel that an end was drawing near. Not *the* end like death—but an end to something beautiful and vital that could not survive, once Grahame knew about Norman Grey and the little child. At last she knew she must tell Grahame everything.

In a way Joan began to prepare for this ending. She and Grahame, she knew, would go on living together, they would try, after a while, to forget the thing that had come between them. They would reach over it with gifts of lovely things like tender services and memories—but always *it* would lie between them and by and by it would do something to them. Just what?

Once Grahame had said: "Of course, my dear girl, I didn't think that you were born in the fog on the moors. I always knew that rather splendid things had happened to you, gone into the making of you. But when I *saw* you, I knew you had been made for me and I was prepared to be grateful for anything that had made you what you are." He had said that during those divine days in Scotland while he was growing stronger and while he was forever thanking her, in his happy, laughing way, for marrying him like a pig in a poke.

"But, Ken," she had answered fervently, "when I loved you you seemed to step out of the past—to me there was only you."

And then, from the puzzling conflicts, a clear call came. Grahame and Joan were planting tulips in their garden. It was a warm day, more like June than autumn. "A glad day," Grahame had said, and he had come early from the city.

The telephone rang and Joan went in to answer it. It was Nancy at the other end.

"You once said that you would come to Norman if he asked for you," she said, and her voice sounded tense and husky. "He has asked for you and you must hurry. Can you drive in?"

"Yes," Joan replied, "I'll start at once."

Always after she was to remember Grahame as she saw him when she rejoined him. His face was lifted from the sweet-smelling earth over which he was bending; his eyes were waiting for her. Waiting! and the afternoon sunlight slanted down upon his rugged, happy face. She told him simply.

"Shall I go with you?" Grahame asked.

"No—I'll take the little car. I'll be back as soon as I can or I'll telephone for you to meet me in town if I must stay."

"All right." No quiver of dissatisfaction—merely the boyish look of regret at the interruption. Then: "Poor chap! But it will be hard for you, Joan."

"No—not in the way you may imagine. I wish now that I had gone before."

Driving into town Joan had time to think. More than she had ever dreaded anything in her life she dreaded this meeting and parting with Norman Grey. It became, as the miles sped past, a most unnatural and menacing thing. Apart from the wrenching sadness of such a meeting it was so harrowing and useless. Did Norman feel he wanted her for the sentiment that was long since dead? Then: "Could he have known about the baby?" But no, that was impossible.

By the time Joan reached the Greys' home she was nervous and full of fear. That was it—fear of the unknown. How quiet the house was. The servant who let her in motioned her to the stairs. The quietness was that of a brooding storm. Joan hoped that Nancy would not be there. Mrs. Grey met Joan in the upper hall—old Mr. Grey was passing out of his son's room and did not turn his head to greet Joan. For all the stillness and order there was a sense of hurry that haunted the house; marked every individual.

"My dear, Norman is in there." Mrs. Grey took Joan's hand. Upon the mother's face was the tracing of deep sorrow, but a strength that bided its time. There would be days and nights in which to shed bitter tears—tears at least could wait!

Joan went into the front room. The late sun still came in at the west windows, the fine old furniture shone in the glow, and upon the wide bed lay all that was left of Norman. A mere shadow of himself—hardly a familiar touch, he seemed an utter stranger to Joan. Her heart overflowed with pity, but it was almost a shock to her to realize how utterly all other emotions were lacking.

Grey's eyes were closed. Joan noiselessly took a chair beside the bed and waited. Norman was not asleep, but he was striving to choose as few words as possible in which to tell what he felt he must tell. It had been a desperate struggle to reach any conclusion. It would have been so much easier to go out of life and leave the muddle for others to solve—but he dared not. Joan was happy, perhaps no one would ever discover the secret. But from this argument Grey's soul revolted. He had seen that little child on the lonely farm—all that was fine in him, dormant as it was, Joan had touched, and Joan's child cried out to him for justice. Then, strange as it appeared, Grey perhaps knew better than anyone else Joan's true nature. He had been the worst sufferer from her reactions, or so he believed as he lay there dying—and Joan's impulses were honest and true. But what could he say? How dared he, lying there all but dead, shatter such safety and happiness as he felt Joan had achieved? Still, he must do it and do it quickly. The thing must be done. The dying see clearly and there is little time, so little! Joan must have the truth.

He opened his eyes. His weary, sick soul looked out of the caverns; his thin, cold hand fumbled toward

Joan's. She reached and took it in her own; she tried to smile.

"Dear old Joan!" This shook the girl to the depths she had believed were beyond his troubling.

"Norman, dear, I only waited until you asked for me —you know that?"

"Yes, I knew." The breath came pantingly. There was little choice of words now; little thought as to their effect; there might be only a moment. "The baby!"

At this Joan stiffened as if bolts of electricity were driven through her body. Her mind did not seem to register anything but the one fact, "He knows!"

"Yes, there was a baby, Norman." No time for subterfuge or questions. How strange the words sounded, coming as they did on the even, calm tone. "It was born—dead."

"It lived. Maine—I—found out! I dared not—die——"

Joan swayed, but she rallied. As Norman looked, so Grahame had looked the night of her marriage. But there was to be no coming back for Grey, and suddenly Joan realized that. He had done the one tragic act of his life and he was dying.

"Stay by me—just you," he whispered.

Joan asked no question. There would be time for that later—with Patricia.

"I will, dear." And all the time there was beating on Joan's brain the terrible thing he had said.

"Just—you and me, Joan."

"Just—you and me, Norman."

"Have I done wrong?"

"No—you have done right, dear Norman." The dying must go out as unburdened as possible. She smiled at him.

Norman panted: "I—wanted—Joan—to—marry you."

"Yes, I know. You would have done anything for me, Norman, but—I could not accept."

"You mean that?"

"With all my heart."

"I couldn't do anything after I knew about the child—Laurine, you know?"

"Yes, I understand about Laurine, Norman."

"You will—still be happy—your husband——"

"That will be all right, Norman. Rest now. See! I'll put my arm under your head. Try to sleep." A shaft of sunlight struck across Grey's face. It transfigured it. His head sank peacefully upon Joan's shoulder.

"Wonderful! wonderful," he whispered.

Mrs. Grey came to the doorway, gave one look, and motioned to her husband, who stood behind her. And so it was that Norman Grey drifted out, having, by one stroke, shattered the lies and deceits of stronger people.

It was seven o'clock when Joan telephoned to Grahame. "Would you mind, dear, if I stayed with Grandy to-night?"

"Alone—dear heart?"

"Very much alone, dear."

"If that is best, of course, Joan, but telephone any moment you want me. How is—Grey?"

"He died at six o'clock."

"Dear child—are you sure you do not need me?"

"I'm sure I *do* need you and if—if I get to needing you too much I'll drive out late. Leave the light in the east window burning."

And then Joan went to Patricia Henley and found her in the library. Patricia started to her feet when she saw Joan. "Have you had dinner?" she asked. "I have just finished but——"

"I have had all that I want, Grandy."

"Have you been ill, Joan, had an accident——?"

"No. Norman Grey has just died—he died in my arms."

Patricia reeled before this blow. She sank back in her chair. She seemed on the moment to know everything. She looked into Joan's white, still face, quailed before the wide, frightened eyes, and said weakly: "Joan, dear, dear child, sit down."

Joan dropped into a chair near by. "I think you better tell me, Grandy, what I do not already know," she said, and while there was emotion in the voice, there was awe and curiosity, too. She was dangerously quiet.

Patricia, haggard and gray, tried to steady her voice. "My darling," she quivered, "it was because I loved you—wanted to—to save you."

"Of course—but what did you want to save me from?"

"Utter——" Patricia found no word for what she wanted to say.

"As if you could!" Joan shook her head sadly. "Oh! Grandy—that is the difference between you and me."

"Joan, try to understand, my darling."

"I *do* understand."

"You cannot, dear. You are young. You have not

lived three lives as I have: my own, your mother's, and now—yours."

"No one can live any life but his own; no one has a right—— Oh! Grandy, what *have* you done, what have you done?" Then: "The—the baby—*my* baby—tell me——" Suddenly Joan realized that she did not know whether the child lived, now, or not.

"It's with Margot. It has everything; it always shall have. People think it is one of the children Margot helped and saved." Patricia was rushing wildly along. Her eyes were burning feverishly. She was pleading, imploring. "She——"

"It is a girl?" Joan broke in, and Patricia nodded. "What do they call her—my baby?" Joan asked. The trifles seemed so terribly important.

"Bethan. Elizabeth Ann."

"And is she—what does she look like, Grandy?" Joan was straining forward over outstretched clasped hands.

"She is a beautiful child. She looks as you did, Joan, when your dying mother gave you to me. Oh! Joan, have mercy!"

"Mercy?" Joan gasped. "Mercy? Why, Grandy—it is I who need mercy." And then Joan, spent and worn to the last verge of endurance, turned her face to the back of the chair and wept as if her heart would break.

Patricia did not attempt to quiet her—she wished that she too might weep. But she was old, old, and fear and years of anxiety upheld her now instead of beating her down. As Joan wept she was marshaling her routed forces into some semblance of order. "Ken—Ken!" she sobbed.

"Shall I telephone to him, Joan?"

Joan turned a white, wet face to her grandmother. "Send for him? Send for Ken? Why, can't you see, Grandy, that I may never have him again?"

"Nonsense, Joan. You talk like a silly child. As things are now a dozen different courses are open to you. As for myself—I can live once more, now that you know. Oh! the silence has all but killed me."

Joan stared; she dared not speak.

Patricia went on and reduced the next few minutes to questions and answers. "What are you going to do, Joan?"

"Go—to Maine."

"That's sheer madness, child, until things are straightened out here."

"I am going to Maine in a few days, anyway."

"And—in the meantime?"

"I do not know, Grandy."

"Exactly. Now, darling, listen to me. All your life you have been my one thought—you are now. You must take my advice until you can act wisely for yourself. You are in no state, Joan, to-night, to decide anything. You might do something that you'd regret forever. You owe your husband something——"

"Oh! Ken——" again Joan turned her head.

"And you owe me something, Joan." No response to this. Then: "And your child, Joan. It is in your power to make or destroy your child's future, now that you know. And, my dear, there are many who would uphold my course; old prejudices are not all dead."

"No—they are not!" Bitterness crept into Joan's tone. Drying her eyes, she turned once again to Patri-

cia. "Grandy—you will not understand this or me—I know you cannot but you must listen to me all the same. Even above Ken"—the name came brokenly—"there is this little child."

"Exactly! And she is well cared for and safe unless her life is disturbed. Joan—this is what I want to impress upon you—you must act wisely for this child."

"Act—act—is there anything to do but go to her, take her? Why, Grandy, she is Norman Grey's child as well as mine. I know—I *knew* Norman. I must—— Oh! Grandy, *do* try to understand. I must train the—my baby away from what I—I ran away from. Do you see what I mean? No one can do it but me."

"Perfectly." Patricia was gathering strength, but Joan might shatter it at any moment. While it lasted she must use it. "I understand perfectly, Joan, but let us suppose you go at once to Maine and drag that young, healthy, happy child into this confusion. Why, you do not even know what your own immediate future is to be, nor your husband's nor mine—let alone Margot's. She adores the child. For heaven's sake, Joan, go slowly. You cannot afford to blast lives in the name of —what?"

"Simple justice and truth, Grandy, at last!"

"My dear, when you are sixty-five you will know that justice and truth are never simple." Patricia tried to smile but made poor work of it. Joan's tragic face stayed the smile on her stiffening lips. "All this has been shocking to you, my dear child—I had hoped——" Patricia faltered.

"Grandy, just what have you hoped?" Joan caught

her breath. "Did you think this would always lie hidden?"

"It was possible, Joan. I took the chance for you. The child's future—I have provided for. Margot is—was going to take her abroad."

"A nameless little child——" Joan broke in.

"And what name do you propose to give her?" Patricia drove this shaft in deftly. Joan fell back. Taking advantage of the moment, Patricia rushed on.

"That's exactly what I mean, Joan. Of course you must tell your husband—you meant to before you married him; it remains now to choose your time. You have talked of adopting a child"—Patricia felt her way gingerly and did not look at Joan. "Let us suppose, after you have told Kenneth, that you can offer this little child a home and name—can you not see? Grahame's name, your own name, now. Joan, be sensible, and besides being sensible, be merciful. What right have you, in order to ease what you call your conscience, to make so many others miserable? After all, you are one against many. Your own decision should be deliberate and wise—you cannot afford to think only of what you term conscience.

"Where are you going, Joan?" For Joan was rising and drawing on her coat.

"Back to Ken, Grandy."

"You mean—to fly in the face of all that I have urged?"

"I do not know. I must get to Ken."

"Let me send for him to come here?"

"No—I want him, there."

"Joan, you are half fainting," for Joan *was* swaying

weakly. "You must eat something. It is after eight—Joan, I beg of you——"

"All right, Grandy, I will eat something—and take a glass of wine."

"Come, then, darling, lean on Grandy."

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Joan left Patricia Henley she felt like one released from deadening bondage. Her one thought and desire was to reach Grahame. It was aften ten o'clock and, once the city limits were past, she broke the speed laws until suddenly, as if a hand were laid upon her, she slowed down, relaxed, and was conscious of the necessity of thinking things out. The little car was rolling quietly over the smooth, broad road, flanked, now, by tall pines that cast long, black shadows, for the moon had risen. The solemn night seemed to take Joan into its gentle, somber safety.

For the first time in hours she was conscious of herself, her problems, her relation to them, the grave necessity of her responsibility to them. It was only a few hours since Nancy had telephoned and Grahame had bidden her good-bye in the garden. Since then Norman Grey had died in her arms. Norman Grey, the father of her living child, and now she was going to her husband, the only man she had ever loved. It seemed like some grim dream. "Yes, the only man I have ever loved!" Joan insisted upon that. She repeated the words. They convinced something in her aching brain; they gave courage and, at the same time, warned her to go slow. All else was confused, unbelievable. Unless she held to that she would become hopelessly bewildered.

What had Life done to her? That remained to be proved—most of all to herself! Patricia Henley had all but thrown Joan into panic. There was so much to say for and against Patricia's part in the tragedy, and Patricia had looked so beaten and helpless. But Patricia had, too, spoken words of wisdom. Patricia was wise; she could not be discounted. From her standpoint Patricia had acted according to her lights. She had been unselfish, had borne a heavy load, had faced danger; and she had stood up, under revealment, still unselfish. At the most trying moment she had considered Joan alone. Joan, thinking back on the hour she had spent with Patricia, realized the strength of the vanquished woman. How white and pitiful her face had gleamed, but how proudly she had held her head. Perhaps she was crying alone, now that she was left free to relax. She had no one to go to, no one to whom she could turn for solution.

At this Joan's head was raised—she looked more than ever like Patricia. She had been rushing to Grahame for solution of a problem that was in no sense his. She knew that now. She had meant to fling herself in his arms; blurt out her confession, knowing full well that his love and his position would compel him to stand by her, help her to discover some way out of the hopeless tangle. She had, subconsciously, relied upon this. Then, with a shudder, she remembered that in like fashion Norman Grey had once shifted his burdens; so had Corlyss Trent. It was the way of the weak, the easiest way.

"I cannot take it!" Joan lifted her eyes. "I could never live my life afterward. If only I can be honest,

leave Ken free to act, I can keep my self-respect. There is no other way!"

Clearly this course opened before her. It was to be no easy way to travel. Grahame would rush to her defense. Joan flushed as honesty flayed her. She knew that her youth, her beauty, the mighty attraction that held her and Grahame, would plead for her; cause Grahame to glorify the impulse that would overcome all else. Thinking this, Joan knew that she must escape that attitude of Grahame's even if it cost her all that she held dear. With strange insight she saw the years ahead when youth, beauty, even the passion would go, and leave calm reason to deal with the situation and the little, live child!

Then it was that Joan decided to go away before she told Grahame anything. She must go to Margot and see that little child! No passion of maternity stirred in Joan. Bethan was simply a little child who must be dealt with justly—now that the truth were known. From Maine she would write to Grahame. She would not confuse him by her presence; she would make no appeal. Even in that tense moment, now that she was bent upon honesty, Joan felt no shame, no sense of evil. This realization strengthened her, but it left her terribly lonely. It took her, spiritually, really far from Grahame; it seemed, in a way, disloyal to him. Why should he not have her with him when he faced a decision? But this was not convincing.

Joan now speeded up and let her thoughts deal with practical issues that must be met at once. What name was she to offer that little child in Maine? Not Grey's. No good could come from plunging innocent people

into further grief—that could not help little Bethan. Not Grahame's name. Grahame had shared his name with her, Joan, but he alone had power to do that. "And I have no name," Joan thought, "none that would secure that little child from worse trouble." Still, there was but one thing to do. Go to Maine. Always Joan came back to that. Step by step, honestly, as bravely as one could who was emerging from shock—there was no other way but to go to Maine.

The white road stretched before, the woods were left behind. There were no shadows, like black bars, across the highway now. Just a straight, clear, lonely way home. It was nearly midnight when Joan turned into the home gates. Her tired eyes dimmed as she saw the light in the east window. Grahame would be awake, waiting for her. Did she not know?

Noiselessly she lifted the latch of the outer door—no lock was turned against her. Silently she stepped inside, wondering a little why the noise of the car had not warned Grahame of her coming. Grahame, sitting by the fire in their bedroom, had fallen into a light sleep; he had not heard the car, but he did hear the muffled cry of joy that Joan's little dog made as he was lifted and pressed against his mistress's heart.

"Is that you, Joan?" Grahame called, and was already on the stairs.

Joan, white-faced, sad-eyed, and motionless, stood with the soft, cuddling body of her dog pressed close. "Yes, Ken." Then: "Norman Grey is dead. He died—in my arms!"

"Poor chap!" Grahame lifted the dog from Joan's

clasp and put his arms about her, "but lucky, since he had to die."

"There's so much to tell, Ken."

"Not a word to-night, dear girl. You look like a ghost. Have you had anything to eat?"

How like Grahame that was! "Yes—with Grandy. I went to her, Ken—I had to."

Grahame was leading, half carrying, Joan upstairs —the little dog nuzzling at their heels. Joan accepted the reprieve—she was too exhausted to weigh the right of how little or how much she dared accept, but her hard-won conclusions as to her duty held firm. As long as she did not falter she could afford to relax. The blessedness of the quiet bedroom, the cheerful fire, the sweet familiarity, acted like a drug that left her senses clear, but incapable of struggle.

And sleep came. Deep, restoring sleep. When Joan awoke the sun filled the room. Grahame was gone, the house was very still. It was ten o'clock. On the dresser lay a note: "Business, dear. I will call you up later. Eat a good breakfast. I have left the tray ready."

No maid would be in that day—she had been given a few days' vacation—so Joan dressed slowly, thinking —thinking, smiling a little as she realized that she was putting things in order as she went along. To-morrow she would not be in the sweet, sacred room, to-morrow Grahame must not be hampered by unnecessary disorder.

Downstairs the sight of the tray set before the open fire made Joan catch her breath. Grahame had removed all traces of his hasty meal. Her favorite cup and saucer were on the tray, an autumn flower—Grahame had

taken time to bring one from the garden and place it by her plate. Every little proof of his love and tenderness hurt her—but in a holy way. She had never loved him more than now when she was about to leave him, set him free of her.

Obediently Joan prepared and ate her breakfast, she telephoned to the Grand Central and secured ticket and berth for the night train. Then she sent a brief telegram to Margot. Hard as she tried to soften the thing, make it plausible, the words sounded cold and brutal after all the silent years.

I will be with you sometime to-morrow.

It might have been better worded, but Joan could not form any sentence that would make it so. Then at last she telephoned to Grahame.

"I want to have dinner in town with you, Ken, may I?"

"Splendid. Come in the little car. We can take our time on the road home. There'll be a good moon."

"Yes, Ken." Joan's voice broke.

"All right, my dear?"

"Yes, Ken. I'll be at your office by five-thirty."

"Make it five, Joan, not a moment later."

"Five, then, Ken."

All through the day Joan set the house in order. It was like settling things into shape after someone had gone away forever! "Forever?" Joan's youth and love and loyalty rose in arms against such a conclusion. It could not be! After Grahame knew there would be readjustment, somehow, some way. And then, as such things do occur—for once they are intrusted to the

ether they live forever—Joan felt as clearly as she had long ago, that sense of demand, an impression of being unable to escape. As it materialized that day in her room in Patricia's house, it seemed again to form—a hand was extended. An open, outstretched hand waiting for payment!

So real was this impression that Joan tried to conquer it by reality—she looked about the room, fixing in her mind the furniture that she and Ken had chosen, piece by piece, the draperies that Nancy had hung—the home place; but still the asking hand persisted. "This is all mine!" hysterically the words escaped her and then she sat down, covered her eyes, and struggled for self-possession. It was no time, now, for breaking. The Presence waited. Joan had no inclination to cry, she felt defiant; exasperated, as she might have felt were she trying to convince some dull, slow mentality of an obvious fact. It was all a pitiful waste of time and effort, but so long as that ghostly demand for some kind of payment was obdurate, there was but one thing to do: get to Margot and begin from there—to pay!

At three o'clock Joan started for New York. She left no word for the maid who would return next day—Grahame would see to all that. By to-morrow he would be alone; remembering that, Joan's lips set rigidly as she drove away. She stopped at the Grand Central, checked her bag and got her tickets, then drove around the park for a time. She did not want to interfere with Grahame's business. She considered going to Patricia's but decided against that. She longed for a word with Nancy but dared not trust herself there. She could write from Maine and explain, but if she went now and Nancy

gave her that long, keen look that seemed to light the way ahead like a beacon, there would be no concealment, for above all else Joan longed to talk over this whole sad business with Nancy. But that must not be done until Grahame understood everything and, as far as was possible, had decided upon a course of action.

Grahame was ready to set forth when, promptly at five, Joan drove up to his office.

"There's something about your punctuality, Joan," Grahame laughingly remarked, "that smacks of humor."

"I was afraid of getting here too early," Joan explained. "I imagine you pared off a half hour, anyway." It wasn't wise to look at Grahame, he might break down the flimsy defenses she had erected; they seemed utterly undependable when he was near.

"There's a small restaurant on a roof not far from here," Grahame said, "the food is good and very few go there for dinner."

"You take the wheel, Ken." Joan wanted to look at him while he could not confuse her by looking at her.

"Tired?"

"Yes—rather. Besides, I love to see you drive. You seem a part of the machine."

The restaurant was almost empty and they chose a table by a window from which the high buildings, like jutting crags, could be plainly seen against the copper-colored sunset sky.

"Lovely!" Joan exclaimed. Then: "Oh! Ken, don't you love New York? It is so—everything! It's as you look at it; what you long to get out of it and put into it. It's such a spiritual thing."

"A queer idea of New York, Joan." Grahame was selecting from the menu what he knew Joan liked. "Most people regard the city as an ogre squeezing the life out of folks, not a benevolent giver. They have wonderful lobster here, my dear. Personally, I do not care for the architecture of lobster, so let's have it Newburg. One gets the taste then and loses the design."

Joan laughed. Things were becoming natural and rather jolly—dangerously so, for off in the near distance there was that little child in Maine who did not seem in any way to relate to the Joan sitting opposite Grahame, but to another Joan who was going to be very difficult to explain to him. Then quite suddenly, while they were eating the soup, Joan said: "Ken, dear, I want to run away." It rather surprised Joan to hear the words. She had meant to approach the subject quite differently.

Grahame's hand was steady as he passed the plate of rolls. "Alone?" His eyes were quizzical.

"Yes, Ken."

"Tired of me, dear?"

"Never that! But, Ken, aren't you—interested?"

"Awfully."

"Aren't you going to make objections? Aren't you going to sulk?"

"My dearest girl, you haven't sounded the depths of my love and understanding."

Joan winced and her hands trembled. Grahame puzzled her. No woman likes to receive what she desires without a bit of a struggle. "Ken, are there no limits to your tolerance and generosity toward me?"

"I haven't discovered them, my dear. When I think

I am coming up against a limitation it expands. It rather disgusts me at times until I realize how utterly I trust you. Joan, I wonder if you understand yourself as well as I understand you?"

"I hope not, Ken." They were quiet while the waiter changed the plates. Then: "Ken, I'm going up to Maine to see an old Scotch woman who was once my nurse."

"The woman of whom Jane Jones reminded you?"

"Yes. Funny thing about types, isn't it, Ken? I suppose if one were very wise one would know the mark on people."

Grahame watched Joan as she dropped her eyes. She did look thin and pale!

"Ken."

"Yes—darling."

"The place to which I am going is called 'Off the Road'—the railroad station is Starton."

"Thanks, dear. I like to know where you are." Then with a little laugh, "Joan, I suspect that you believe I will trail after you."

"No—I will not be gone long, Ken, but I want you to know where I am."

"And I always want to know that, sweet."

A silence fell between them. With the mighty pressure of unsaid things Joan was incapable of saying anything. She dared not, with Ken's eyes upon her. She knew he was looking at her.

"Suppose we take a little walk, Joan, before we start for home," he said.

"We'll walk to the Grand Central, Ken, and pick up my bag. I have my reservations for the eight-thirty train."

For a moment Grahame's eyes held a look of surprise, question. Then he laughed. "Well, my dear, you certainly have cleared the tracks!"

"Ken—I'll soon explain everything."

"That's all right, my girl. Have you taken enough money?"

"Perhaps you had better give me some more, Ken. I—I may need a good deal."

Grahame passed her all that he had in his wallet. "Got your bank book, dear?"

"No."

"Take mine. Your signature is as good as mine."

They walked to the Grand Central. Grahame bought some magazines, talked of home details, kept up a cheerful manner, and at last kissed Joan good-bye, at the side of her sleeping compartment, and went away!

Then it was that Joan all but broke. She wanted to run after him, call upon him to save her from something that really had no place in their lives. Instead, she undressed and lay down, wide-eyed and sleepless, on her bed. The swaying train, the singing of the wheels, calmed her at last. She was going—going—to what? "Anyway, I am going!" thought Joan drowsily, and fell asleep.

It was nearly six o'clock the next afternoon when Joan paid the boy who had driven her up from Starton, and sent him away. Her bags were on the stone step by the door; apparently no one had heard the car. But there were voices in the distance and Joan walked around the house, then stood still, as she had done once before, and looked at the picture before her. Margot was feeding her chickens and pigeons. Wings, wings,

and the whirring of wings. Amid them stood Margot, a deep yellow bowl in one hand, the other hand scattering food and, toddling about, stumbling, picking herself up, laughing, babbling—was a little sunny-headed child. In that moment of revealment the beauty of Bethan flamed radiantly. The child's eyes were yellow-brown and her skin fair with just a touch of tan that had a golden hue.

Then it was that Joan spoke. She felt like a stranger who had come upon an intimate scene. "Margot—I'm here."

At the sound of a voice Bethan fled, stumbling, to Margot—she was timid, unused to strangers. Margot lifted the child up and carried her to Joan. There was something in the action that suggested defense, alarm.

"Margot—I came as soon as I knew!"

"That would be like you, my dear. Come in. Come in." They covered vast areas during those few words. It was after Bethan had been reassured and placed at a safe distance that Margot took Joan in her arms and kissed her tenderly.

"We'll have supper first," she said. "Everything is ready. Your telegram came promptly." Margot bustled about, action helped; but little Bethan, apart, observant, watched every move. Once Joan started to go to the child, but Bethan called affrightedly to Margot. "She must be won slowly," Margot said, as she quieted the child; "she's a strange bairn, always on the wing, as it were, ready to fly when she takes fright."

Joan's throat contracted as she turned away.

It was over at last, the evening meal, Bethan's bath—how sweet and beautiful the little body was! Then the

child was put to bed and Joan and Margot faced each other across the fire-lighted hearth. Margot reached for her knitting bag and set to work. "A sweater for the little lass," she explained, and waited.

Every silent moment fell like a weight upon Joan's thought. She tried to choose some words that would sound natural; then she resented Margot's attitude in a dull aching way; the clicking of the steel needles were like raps on sore nerves. Presently Margot, sensing something of all this, rolled her knitting carefully, put it in the bag, and folded her hands patiently. At last she asked: "And who told you, my dear, after all this long time?" Margot was at her ease. She had had time since receiving the telegram to comprehend, in part at least, and to face the possibility of renouncing her claim to Bethan, and facing the lonely stretch on beyond.

"The—little Bethan's father. He was dying—when it comes to—to dying—things look so different, Margot. So terribly different."

"They do that, lass. But I thought the—the father never knew about the child, my lady?"

"I know, Margot, but not even Grandy can outwit God!" This sounded shocking, and a note of bitterness struck across the words. Margot drew her brows together, and then asked:

"The—the child's father—who was he, Joan? Are you free to tell?"

"Grey—Norman Grey. Grandy says he found out when he came to look at some land up here—he pretended that he wanted to buy it."

"I sensed as much"—Margot spoke as to herself; "it's marvelous the way the Lord has of preparing us."

"Yes," murmured Joan, "isn't it, Margot? Somehow shocks are softened. Oh! Margot, it has all been so terribly wrong—the deceit, the hiding. Anything would have been better than such a course and much would have been righted."

This seemed to ease Margot's troubled thought. She spoke more gently: "I had my doubts, lass, but it was my lady's way. She always meant to—to tell you in time."

"Perhaps," Joan spoke wearily. "It was Grandy's way to deal with it—but it was my—my problem. I should have—— Well, let it go. Now that I know, I am here."

"And what will you do, lass?" Strange to say, Margot felt a sense of relief. She could act with Joan, at last, not against her; not for her, but with her. "Now that you are here, my dear, what are you going to do?"

"That is what I've come to find out, Margot; I've come to you as I came before. You'll help me?"

"I'll do my best, lass."

"It isn't so easy to right a wrong, Margot, as it often seems. One lets loose so many other troubling things, things that never can be righted."

"There, there, lass." Margot felt her throat grow tense and burning. She was never one to take comfort in seeing another's suffering, no matter how just the suffering might be. "I've always noticed that there's a place to start from, right enough. After that, if you go slow, trusting to God's leadings and not your own bungling ways, there's light all along. Enough to see by."

Joan looked helplessly at the rugged, honest face. Margot, like Patricia, was growing old—she could

not be hard with either of them. Margot was talking on:

"You were pushed into the wrong path, my lass. I'm sure that you would have been honest enough. My lady, in her pride and fear, I in my weakness and because I owe my lady a great debt of gratitude—we pushed you blindfolded on the wrong path."

"Yes, that's true, Margot. But now I see." Then: "Margot—I want to tell you about my husband."

"A fine, upstanding man, my lady tells me."

"Yes, Margot."

It was simple enough to tell Margot of those days in Devonshire, the accident, the struggle against death, the marriage in the quiet room with the fog rolling in through the windows. Margot listened and nodded. It all began to seem simpler to her. Very simple, as truth has a way of seeming.

At the end of the story Margot said gently: "There's only one thing more for you to do, lass: listen to God."

"Listen to God?" Joan repeated. "That sounds so easy to say, Margot."

"It's easy to do, too, lass. The trouble comes when we take to talking back to God, arguing with Him. God is terrible patient, my lass, but He has no need of explanations from us. He knows. And now come with me and see your bonnie little child."

For a moment Joan held back, but Margot was leading the way, a lighted candle in her hand.

"Come!" she repeated, and Joan followed on. It was like another journey of long ago—they stood at last in the east chamber by the side of little sleeping Bethan. Margot set the candle down and left the room.

Joan knelt by the bed. The flickering candle flame cast strange shadows that moved about the room like soft, seeking, spiritual things; it was a holy place, and Joan felt awed and stilled. Bethan lay upon her side, the sweet face uplifted—a strange attitude. It was one that suggested flight, not rest, and yet the child was sleeping deeply.

The mystery of that hour Joan was never to completely understand. Grave and wonderful influences were having their way with her. Something larger, more significant than any interpretation man or woman could control, was shaping, fixing drifting atoms into one beautiful whole. As she gazed upon the sleeping child Joan felt as if some power were crowning her. She was in a holy place where there was great light and peace.

Bending, she touched reverently, as one does a little sleeping child, the small, rosy-palmed hand, the sweet, uplifted face. Then, risking much, she bent closer and kissed the pretty lips. Bethan stirred, opened her eyes, smiled before fright had time to enter in, and again went off into unconsciousness. But the smile remained. For a full hour Joan knelt by the bedside. The candle flickered, flared, and the flame died. Then she rose and walked down the hall.

Margot was sitting in her room, knitting. The door was open—Margot was waiting. One look at Joan's face and the knitting was flung aside. Margot had no further need of words—her waiting was ended; Joan had taken control but she was weary, deadly weary.

Margot took a candle from the stand. "Your room is ready for you, lass," she said. "You look spent, but you

will sleep." Without a word Joan followed on. When they reached the quiet room Margot put the candle down and, going to the door, paused, seemed to get her leadings, and said: "When you are ready, my dear, call and I'll come and tuck you in."

At last the call came, and as Margot was tucking the coverlid close, Joan spoke.

"Margot, whatever happens, will you stay with Bethan and me?"

"You mean, lass, will I bide with you and the bairn always?"

"Yes, Margot—always!"

So there was to be no cruel wrenching; just a shifting of scene. A little less responsibility, perhaps, but much, much more than she had feared. "I will that, my dear," Margot said, and passed quietly from the room.

The next day Joan wrote a long letter to Grahame. During the night she had, at intervals, debated as to whether she would send for Grahame or go to him. Now that certain decisions had been arrived at the mere telling of what must be told did not greatly matter, indeed it seemed quite simple, but Grahame must be considered. To go to him would confuse the situation, she knew that; to send for him might alarm him. It was better to write fully, going into the past, taking time, rewriting, making everything plain, and then await Grahame's own decisions. At best it was difficult, but no longer confusing.

The letter was written, and Margot drove Joan and Bethan to The Center, where the letter was posted in time for the outgoing mail. Then the waiting time began. Day by day Joan, with infinite tact and patience,

tried to win Bethan's confidence. She never thought of gaining the child's love. That was for the future. Little by little, Bethan's shyness departed. She accepted, tolerated, and presently showed a sweet interest. Hearing Margot often address Joan as "lass," the child adopted the name.

"Lass," she called Joan, then gave an elfish laugh as if sensing an absurdity she could not fathom. By degrees Joan undertook small services for her child; she learned the thrill of contact with the naked, sweet body —the clinging of the golden hair around her fingers.

Then days passed. Four and five. Still no word from Grahame. Bethan's charms, her growing confidence, lost their appeal. With all her aching senses Joan wanted Grahame—no one else in all the world.

"Ken! Ken!" she thought. "Surely there must be some way out. Are you trying to find it?"

CHAPTER XXII

AND then, on the sixth day, Joan put Bethan to bed for her noonday nap and went out of doors. Margot had gone, earlier, to look at the meadows beyond the fringe of woods. More and more she left Joan and Bethan together. With a courage that few would have suspected, she was letting go. Some kind Fate might permit her to remain near the child she adored, but never again would it be *her* child. She must unclasp the small clinging fingers; she must set the little puzzled face toward Joan, away from herself. Sometimes Margot wondered what God thought about it all. The open spaces were the only spots, for the time being, where Margot could stretch her soul and get a vision. At best the vision was blurred, none too satisfying; but it was a vision.

At times Margot looked at Joan and her heart hardened—then in simple justice she relented and smiled as she watched how awkwardly, how fearfully Joan took up the duties Margot herself had performed so easily. Often restive under Joan's fumbling attempts, Bethan would turn a small bewildered face toward Margot and whimper: "Auntie—take her baby!" she would cry. Margot wondered what God thought of that, too.

"The bairn must learn a new name for me," she mur-

mured, and her eyes grew dim as she spoke of this to Joan.

"Must she?" Joan asked; trifles seemed so insignificant. "What must she call you, Margot?"

"Perhaps the lass will invent a name—with a little help."

At this Joan had smiled. "I think it is rather lovely for her to call you 'aunt,' " she said. "Why should she learn another name?" It really did not matter. Nothing mattered now until Grahame came—or wrote.

As Joan wandered down the lane she found a kind of joy in just going toward Grahame. The day was warm and sunny—sweet with odors of falling leaves. "He's just taking time to consider the best way," she thought, and shook her head. "Poor old Ken!" Then: "I hope his sixth sense will help him now." But this did not comfort Joan; it drove the smile from her lips. She bent to uncover a clump of dandelions that were smothered by leaves but were bravely shining. Then, realizing that she must not go too far from the house, she sat down on a sun-warmed rock, leaned against a tree, and gave herself up to the luxury of the warmth and fragrance that filled the air. She closed her eyes; she felt a drowsiness overcome her which she did not resist. She had not slept well, she would hear any sound from the house. It was wonderful to relax in the warm sun and forget just for a minute. With her senses dulled, Joan drifted mentally.

Would Grahame think her cowardly to write instead of speaking frankly? But as if in answer to this she thought on: "He'll realize that I wanted him to be free to choose—as free as possible. Remembering the day I

married him, he will understand everything when he thinks of that." Then: "Oh, Ken, if you do not come to-day I will go to you. Nothing shall keep me from you." This acted like a narcotic—it slowly drugged her senses. "To-morrow morning—I'll wait until—to-morrow!"

Suddenly Joan opened her eyes—she was not conscious of shock—it seemed quite the natural thing to see Grahame swinging along toward her, bag in hand. The station bus was chugging along the road. Grahame had dismissed it when he saw Joan. He was hurrying, and Joan tried to get up, tried to rush and meet him, but heavy weights seemed holding her back. Every bone ached, but even as she realized this a sense of well-being flooded her—she felt safe, danger was past. Whatever was in store—danger was past.

"I stayed to put things in order." Grahame had reached her, was bending over her, looking deep into her eyes. He did not offer to kiss her! "I did not want to be hurried once I got here. Lord, Joan! how I have missed you!"

Somehow Joan got to her feet—her lips now were clinging to Grahame's. "And I—you!" she managed to say. Then Grahame gently released her. He was fumbling in his coat pocket.

"When this came I knew there was something wrong. I came as soon as I could."

Joan looked at the crumpled letter; she took it in her hand. "Why," she said feebly, "the seal is not broken. You haven't opened it!"

Grahame's eyes were grave and calm. "No," he said

slowly, "what is to be told I would rather hear, my dear. I want to be with you when you tell me."

"Oh, Ken!" Joan gave a laugh that was perilously near to a sob. "Oh, Ken, how could you? It's like coming back to—to suffering after being drugged." Then: "Read the letter now, Ken. I'll sit here and wait."

For answer Grahame took the letter and tore it into shreds. "Between you and me, Joan, there must be nothing like subterfuge, my dear," he said. The tone was steely in its sharpness, but the eyes, fixed upon Joan, were kind beyond words. "You're trying to soften something for me," he added, "by hurting yourself. That's like you, my dear, but it doesn't get us anywhere. Come, let us sit down. I'll put my coat on the rock. There now!" Then, after a moment's pause, "Don't make the telling as long as the letter, Joan. I'll help out with questions to prove my intuitive powers." He mustered a smile. "I suppose whatever the trouble is it began with that young fellow who has just died?"

"Why—Ken!"

"I thought so."

"Ken, I told you that I never loved him, I never did, not for one moment"—Joan flung this out desperately —"just hold to that!"

"I'm sure you did not—but it would not have mattered, would it?"

"Yes, it would have mattered—very much, but, Ken, while we were away once in the woods—Nancy's camp in the Adirondacks—he and I——"

Grahame looked straight ahead of him. Joan knew that he did this to spare her, but his hand held hers firmly, warmly.

"Ken, can you possibly understand how one can be quite carried away by—by emotions, curiosity? I cannot explain—I've never been able to understand it myself—but one can be, utterly."

"Yes, a man understands that, Joan."

"About a woman, Ken?"

"Men are learning to understand, my dear. Men and women are not very different."

"And love—love as you and I know it, Ken, has nothing whatever to do with it."

"No, nothing, Joan, but so few women realize or acknowledge this."

Strange it was to be discussing this phase of the subject just as if it were an interesting matter that concerned neither of them personally. Suddenly this aspect struck them both, and they fell into a troubled silence, too deeply moved for words.

At last Grahame said, almost shyly, "You may have wanted to tell me all this before we were married, Joan, but there was no time."

"No, there was no time, Ken." Grahame *did* remember!

"Then, darling, why torture yourself now—surely you must know——" They looked in each other's eyes at this. Grahame's glance seemed to ask: "Do you think anything could part us?"

And Joan's eyes flung back: "No! but perhaps you'll be sorry some day."

Then Grahame smiled and said, "Just why have you spoken now, dear?" It was not reproof; it was more like irritation at unnecessary insistence upon what could not be helped, a thing so far in the past that it could

not possibly have any real place in the present, unless it were allowed to persist. This question and attitude of mind brought Joan squarely into action.

"Ken, I think I might never have mentioned it, things being as they were, if something had not happened—happened a few days ago."

At this Grahame put his arm about Joan as if withdrawing her from some threatened harm—or claiming her against all demands anything might make against her. The gesture made Joan realize as she had never done before the depth and power of Grahame's love. She looked up at him with tear-dimmed eyes but bravely smiling lips.

He smiled back at her and said quietly: "Yes, dear."

So keenly alive were Joan's senses that she seemed to be conscious of every minute sight and sound—the color, the light and shade, the stirring of wings, the crisp note of the grasshoppers in the dry grass.

"Ken—there was a child!" Joan felt Grahame's body grow rigid, but he did not loosen his hold upon her, nor did he speak. His reaction caused Joan to hurry on as one does who must cross an unfamiliar bridge whose strength cannot be depended upon. She did not pause to consider herself or the impression she was making—she simply rushed on.

"It did not seem possible, right, or—or reasonable, Ken. We thought, Grandy and I, that it was born dead. Grandy really did, at first—remember that always, Ken! Margot brought the baby back to life and when Grandy found out—she kept the truth from me! Can you understand her, Ken? Do not think too harshly of her."

Joan was pleading for Patricia Henley. It was the first plea she had put forth. Somehow this struck upon Grahame's senses like a blow that awakened him from something like coma.

"Yes, I understand. I do not blame her," he said quietly, and somewhere in his brain there was registering the thought that he would have done the same.

"She thought she was saving me, Ken."

"She would, my dear."

"But, Ken, you believe that *had* I known, I would not have shirked? Would not have deserted my baby?"

"I am sure you would not have done either, Joan."

"Thank you, Ken. Then you will understand why, now that I do know, there is only one thing—only one for me to do?"

"And what is that?" Grahame asked this fiercely.

"Why—stay with my—my baby, Ken." The renunciation in word and tone was complete, not to be doubted.

Grahame gave a hard, almost fierce, laugh. Something in that unexplored region of his mind fixed another impression. It brought him nearer to Joan than he had ever been before. A sense of trust, admiration for her courage, and deep sympathy flooded his senses. Still he could find no words to frame his thought. He was bewildered. Slumbering inheritances, inhibitions, struggled for recognition, but they dwindled and faded before the revealment of Joan. Whatever had gone into her life, she *was* what he knew her to be. She might have been otherwise so easily, but she *was* what every fiber of his being knew her to be.

His silence frightened Joan. She felt as if now that she had crossed her tottering bridge she had put be-

tween her and Grahame an impassable barrier. The bridge could not bear his weight—he was not even attempting to cross it. Then she went on evenly—no need of hurry now.

"The child—has been here with Margot—all the time. Norman Grey found it out by chance—pure chance, if there is any such thing, Ken." It was like talking aloud to her lonely self, but Joan went on: "Norman never knew there was a child, Ken, until he—he stumbled upon her. Norman wanted to marry me from the very first, but, you see, I did not love him—I couldn't at any time. I'm glad now, though, since he is dead—to remember that he wanted to marry me. Perhaps in a way he loved me. Things are so—strange and confused, Ken."

At last Joan came to a standstill. She could talk no more. There was nothing more to say. "That's all, Ken," she murmured, and leaned her weight upon his enfolding arm.

The act did something to Grahame that he was never able to explain in all the years that followed. The confidence, the proof of a love that was ready to accept anything that he meted out, broke down every barrier. He was conscious of but one fierce conclusion—in no possibly way must Joan escape him! He must make no misstep. More than all else he must prove to her *his* need of *her;* his fitness to rise to the level where her experiences and courage had carried her. There was no time to argue, to put up a world-old barricade; one dared not judge in the large. He and she, soul bare, faced but one thing—their great and abiding love.

"Ken—isn't there anything you can say?"

"There's only one thing to say, my dear, my dear. I am trying to fill up the spaces you left empty, my darling, but there'll be all of our lives in which to do that. Joan —I have never loved you so comprehendingly as I do now—my wife! Whatever you decide upon I am with you, prepared to share—if you will accept the sharing —everything."

Joan turned and looked into Grahame's face. "By and by, Ken—you will not regret? I could not bear any look but a glad look in your eyes."

"My dear, do you doubt me?"

"But, Ken, you once said, you know, that you could not regard another man's child——"

"Don't, Joan, don't!"

"I must, Ken. I must."

Suddenly Grahame and Joan stood up as if startled by something alarming—it was the call of a sweet baby voice, the stumbling, oncoming sound of baby feet. "Lass! Lass!"

"That is Bethan," whispered Joan—she was watching Grahame's face.

Over the rough path the child came gayly, with outstretched arms and uplifted head. The sunlight seemed to pick her out and play upon her. She tripped and fell; she picked herself up, gave a little whimper—then came on bravely.

Grahame did not move or speak, but his hand clutched Joan's arm painfully. Then into his eyes came a look that Joan knew she must endure—unless little Bethan could conquer it! She could make no appeal against the righteousness of that look—he was looking away from her, for the moment he saw only—the child.

Bethan at last seemed to sense the presence of a stranger. She stood still, her hands dropped to her side, she looked long at Grahame, hesitated, and then did one of those unaccountable things that only children can do—she turned her head as if listening, then lifting her short skirt daintily, she began to dance along, fearlessly, toward the two in the shadow of the tree.

The Piper paused and raised his pipe—he looked at Bethan and his eyes dimmed. Then he began to play once more the tune Joan had chosen. The dance was on!

THE END